In defence of the real God : a proposal arising out of a critical enquiry into the theology of Don Cupitt

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IN DEFENCE OF THE REAL GOD

A PROPOSAL ARISING OUT OF A CRITICAL ENQUIRY INTO THE THEOLOGY OF DON CUPITT

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2000

Submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Ph.D.

IN DEFENCE OF THE REAL GOD.

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ABSTRACT.

The thesis develops out of a critical enquiry into the theology of Don Cupitt. It begins by considering his 'non-realist theology' in Taking Leave of God. It then considers his 'philosophical anti-realism' in Creation Out of Nothing. It concludes by considering how these ideas appear to come to a confluence in What is a Story? The continuing criticism seeks to rebut Cupitt's assertion that non-realist theology is a necessary consequence of utilising the insights of philosophical anti-realism. In so doing, several strategies for rebuttal will be tabled, resulting in one in particular being adopted; that of an epistemology based upon the category of revelation, understood in terms of dialectic presence, described in terms of prevenient grace. This approach can also be described in terms of a fideistic or Reformed epistemology.

Out of this critical enquiry is established a proposal for advocating the reasonableness of realist theology within the context of postmodern philosophical anti-realism. This is centred around the Bible: it is a hermeneutic exercise. The historical development of Biblical interpretation is described, paying particular attention to the contribution of rhetoric, especially its component, accommodation. Positive, though not uncritical use is made of insights derived from structuralist and post-structuralist perspectives. This leads to a consideration of the interpretation of the meaning of the biblical text in terms of reader-response criticism. The reasonableness of a realist theological interpretation of the biblical text according to such an interpretation is then demonstrated in terms of it being a Divinely initiated self-revelation understood in terms of a fideistic, non-foundationalist, epistemology. Such an epistemology is thereby seen to be appropriate in terms of its ability to provide a foundation for all that there is.

This proposal is then considered in terms of the way non-realist theology and realist theology understands and interprets Resurrection as described in the language of the gospel narrative It concludes that, as such, 'reading' the texts invites the conclusion that 'God is Real'.

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INTRODUCTION

1. The Background.

This thesis is the product of an 'encounter' with Don Cupitt. His ideas seemed alien to someone with a traditional Christian upbringing. Yet Cupitt appeared to be asking the same questions regarding the place of Christianity within contemporary society as were being asked by 'traditional', 'evangelical' Christians.[1] However, to engage with Cupitt's 'radical' diagnosis is to realise that it is not simply a matter of suggesting alternative answers and allowing others to judge between them. Cupitt's argument was that traditional Christianity had prescribed for itself any and every possible answer. One either accepted the prescription or else placed oneself outside of the tradition. For Cupitt, therefore, there was the need to reformulate Christian theology in order to address the questions meaningfully. Indeed, the fact that such questions were continuing to be asked in spite of the prescriptive nature of traditional Christian theology demanded that its very basis be questioned. Cupitt's questions were real. What had begun as a search for answers to specific questions became a search for a way to articulate Christian theology so as to allow such questions to be asked and answered in constructive dialogue. Since publishing Taking Leave of God[2], Cupitt has been devoted to this task. Although both honest and diligent in his pursuit, for many the conclusion he reached is far more unpalatable than the nature of traditional Christianity which he had already exposed. Cupitt sought to reformulate Christian theology from the perspective that God - an objectively real

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[1] "A desire for reality is almost universal. If at the moment there is a revolt against the established Christian Church, it is in part a healthy distaste for all that is hollow and humbug, 'Somehow God has become for most people, and even for many practising Christians, unreal', writes Bernadine Bishop, 'The God we want must be real. He must be a convincing personal experience. The God who is not real to me, revealing and operating all that is deepest and most personal in my being is no God to me.' Fair enough! The question is: how can God become real, if indeed He exists at all?" D. Watson, My God is Real, (Eastbourne: Falcon, 1970), p7.

[2] (London: SCM, 1980).

self-existing God - does not exist, i.e. non-realist theology. This thesis, while responding positively to Cupitt's challenge, argues that at the heart of Christian theology it remains reasonable, even persuasive to affirm belief in the existence of an objectively real, self-existing God. It is also true however, that whilst this remains the 'headline' agenda of the thesis, the substantial nature of its enquiry may well be thought of as addressing different though similar issues. To illustrate this, note Stephen Fowl's comments when introducing a discussion on deconstruction, in particular anti-determinate interpretation,

> The view of anti-determinate interpretation I want to discuss begins from a particular vision of determinate interpretation. That is, a particular account of determinate in provides the foil against which to offer the view that interpretation is not determinate. [3]

Two points can be made arising out of this analogy: a) Cupitt may well be criticising a particular expression of realist Christianity in order to argue that Christian theology must necessarily be non-realist, b) This thesis is more concerned with identifying a different, more appropriate way of articulating realist theology - dispositional - than the traditional, propositionally based variety, and uses Cupitt's call for a non-realist theology as its 'foil'.

2. The Context.

The context is a dynamic one. Whilst Cupitt's basic assertion does not alter, the way that it is expressed varies according to the demands of the changing intellectual climate within which Cupitt finds himself working. Consequently, ideas thought capable of rebutting his argument, set within a particular context, are exposed as moribund by the constantly changing backdrop of the ever-changing world of ideas. Therefore, it is necessary to identify a way in which a realist

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[3] S. Fowl, Engaging Scripture, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p41.

Christian theology may be affirmed whatever the context of the challenge to it. To achieve this we consider the text which purports to record the basis upon which Christianity is built, and which claims to provide the interpretative framework within which Christianity can be understood, at any time and in any place; what is regarded by those who believe it to be so as 'The Word of God', the Bible.

3. The Strategy.

What is proposed is the identifying of a hermeneutic strategy, a realist as opposed to a non-realist hermeneutic appropriate for interpreting the Biblical text so as to rebut Cupitt's challenge. Kevin Vanhoozer draws out the distinction between the hermeneutic realist and the hermeneutic non-realist thus,

> The underlying issue concerns the objectivity of meaning and interpretation. Is meaning 'fixed' by the author or by the text, or is it free-floating, varying from reader to reader (or does it arise from some combination of the above?..The hermeneutic 'realist' holds that there is something prior to interpretation, something 'there' in the text, which can be known and to which the interpreter is accountable. By contrast the hermeneutic non-realist (e.g. Derrida, Fish) denies that meaning precedes interpretative activity; the truth of an interpretation depends on the response of the reader. The hermeneutic debate over meaning thus parallels its counterpart in metaphysics; the metaphysical non-realist denies that there is a mind independent reality to which our true descriptions must correspond. The non-realist maintains that the world (or the meaning of a text) is a construct of the mind.[4]

[4] K. Vanhoozer, Is There a Meaning in this text? The Bible, the reader and the morality of literary knowledge, (Leicester: Apollos, 1998), p26.

This is why the basis of our engagement with Cupitt is the biblical text – 'The Word of God' – Cupitt uses the insights of Derrida's hermeneutic non-realism to justify his argument for theological non-realism. We will seek to use the reasonableness of hermeneutic realism as justification for theological realism.

The culmination of Cupitt's own theological enquiry was the adopting of a particular hermeneutic strategy, the approach of post-structuralism – 'deconstructive literary criticism' - an engaging with the world of words. Any such engagement with the world of words - definition, meaning and interpretation – is controversial. Once it is conceded that meaning can never be established certainly, but only achieved consensually, then the possibility of alternative definition, meaning and interpretation has to be acknowledged; we enter the world of dictionaries and libraries.[5] As with words, so with texts; Just as the meanings of individual words might be controversial, so also the controversial nature of the task of textual interpretation. We have to consider what is written about a text as well as the text itself. Anything written about the text is as controversial as anything else that is written about it. It is ironic that Cupitt, in attempting to justify an allegedly non controversial, essentially dogmatic position – non-realist theology - utilises strategies which insist that nothing is non controversial, and that therefore nothing can be asserted dogmatically. Ultimately, if there are no settled answers to questions we must utilise a strategy for answering questions which admits the possibility of any answer. We are seeking a methodology that can embrace the full range of answers. Then, as far as interpreting the biblical text is concerned, our contention will be that it is entirely reasonable, even inherently persuasive to describe Christian theology in terms of realist Christian theology.

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[5] This methodological point is illustrative of a major theme that will emerge in the thesis itself to do with the possibility of metanarrative. It could be argued that a dictionary is an imposed metanarrative of meaning and as such is an inappropriate tool for working within a post-structuralist framework. Interestingly, this is considered in a similar way in terms of emphasising the role of the library in M.C. Taylor, Erring; A Post-modern A/theology, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p74-76.

4. The Thesis.

This thesis is essentially a critical engagement with particular examples of Cupitt's work, beginning with his 'theological watershed' - Taking Leave of God. In chapter 1 we examine his argument that for the sake of the religious integrity of the human subject, non-realist theology is the only appropriate way to interpret Christian theology. In terms of the morality and spirituality of the human subject, autonomy and internalisation must be accepted as its foundation. The human subject, to be truly religious, must jettison any belief in an independently existing God. Much of Cupitt's thought in TLOG is governed by his then Kantian philosophy. When examining the role of morality in non-realist theology we examine Cupitt's attitude to Kant's approach to religion. We identify an essential flaw in the argument which leads to its shortcomings being exposed while, ironically, preparing the way for the reaction of the Post-modern period by suggesting the potential existence of the metanarrative. This preliminary consideration of Cupitt's views serves to indicate the issues to be addressed throughout the thesis. This is because the particular reaction is not as inevitable as Cupitt would have us believe. In contrast to the rigid framework established by his presupposed, allegedly inevitable non-realist theology, we argue that postmodernity allows as much for the flourishing of realist theology as any other position.

In chapter 2 we describe how Cupitt's argument concerning the alleged inevitability of non-realist theology is sharpened by his utilisation of the context of philosophical anti-realism which prescribes the limitations which, he argues, necessarily apply to the use of religious language. This means that Cupitt is shifting the argument away from a purely religious justification for non-realist theology, and towards an epistemological justification. Therefore in order to

engage with his argument we have to deploy an appropriate epistemology. We advocate a realist epistemology, but one which is sustained neither by rationalism or empiricism, but rather by theism. A position summed up by Plantinga's comment, "If Christian theism is true, then the verifiability criterion is false."[6] While accepting that from the perspective of the 'empirico-rationalist epistemological paradigm' of the enlightenment such an approach puts us beyond the 'canon' of what it is to 'know', in the post-enlightenment era, to engage in such an argument is to be behind the debate. However, within what is termed the 'post-enlightenment concept of expanded rationality' it is perfectly reasonable to advocate 'reasonableness' as a category of 'knowing', embracing hermeneutical and metacritical paradigms as opposed to the rational and the empirical which are themselves constrained by the hermeneutical and the metacritical. While such epistemologies are not necessarily theistic, neither are they necessarily non-theistic. In similar vein, just as the categories of 'knowing' are so expanded, so also might be the categories prescribing sources of 'knowledge' be expanded beyond the rational and the empirical, taking in the likes of the history, interpretation and revelation. We contend that it is reasonable to employ the category of revelation as the basis for informing a theistically grounded realist epistemology. Indeed, it is widely used as such both in philosophical theism in general and in Christian theology in particular.[7] However, the category of revelation has come to be utilised in a variety of ways within Christian theology and so it is important that we identify the particular application appropriate to our argument. Avery Dulles identifies six models of revelation operative in contemporary Christian Theology: Revelation as doctrine, as history, as inner experience, as dialectic presence, as new awareness, as symbolic

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[6] A. Plantinga, *Advice to Christian Philosophers,* in M.D.Beatty (ed), Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosophy, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notra Dame Press, 1990), p21.
[7] See D.A.Pailin, *Revelation,* in A.Richardson & J.Bowden, (eds), A New Dictionary of Christian Theology, (London: SCM, 1983), 503-506.

mediation.[8] For our purposes that which approximates most closely to our use of the category of revelation is that modelled in terms of dialectic presence,

> 'God encounters the human subject when it pleases Him by means of a word in which faith recognises Him to be present' (Dulles, p28). This word 'simultaneously reveals and conceals the Divine presence' (ibid.), since even in revelation God remains transcendent and wholly other. The main strength of the model is that it is explicitly Trinitarian. In revelation God speaks God's Word, which cannot be distinguished from God – God's Word is God. Further, the Spirit enables us to receive God's Word as God's Word, without reducing it to a merely human word...As an extreme stance its end result is fideism, i.e. faith without any ground other than Divine authority, without any reference to human reason. One must simply accept the claim to Divine authority without question.[9]

This contention that the category of revelation within Christian theology is to be understood essentially in terms of epistemology is advocated by Christoph Schwoebel,

> The common characteristics of theologies centred on revelation can be seen in the emphasis on the freedom, irreducibility and sovereignty of God's revelation in contrast to all human expectations and cultural conditions. The conception of theology which corresponds to this understanding of revelation is one which emphasises the autonomy and the distinctiveness of theology over against all other forms of knowledge and intellectual enquiry...[ascribes] a unique epistemic status to revelation...Revelation is not subject to any conditions which are not

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[8] A. Dulles, Models of Revelation, (Dublin: Gill & MacMillan, 1983).

[9] N.Ormerod, Introducing Contemporary Theologies: The What and the Who of Theology Today, (Alexandria, NSW, Australia: E.J.Dwyer, 1997), p. 46-47. See also the way G.Fackre incorporates Dulles' analysis, The Doctrine of Revelation; A Narrative Interpretation, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p16-19.

contained in revelation itself and its validation is grounded solely in the Being and Action of God.[10]

What we now have to do is set this understanding of revelation within the wider context of our overall epistemological theory, which in so doing will give added credence to our understanding of revelation in terms of dialectic presence. The realist epistemology employed in this thesis is variously described as 'non-foundationalist', 'non-rational', 'fideistic'. Knowledge of God is confined to that which God reveals of Himself. The content of such revelation, as recorded within the biblical text, is sufficient for knowledge to be had of all that there is in terms of knowledge of God. As such, whilst belief in God – consequent upon having been encountered by a revelation from God – is itself non-foundationalist, philosophically speaking, it is sufficient for providing a foundation for knowledge per se. It is not a product of human reason; it is itself non-rational, yet it can be sustained in the face of rational enquiry, not in terms of its truth, rather in terms of its reasonableness. It is espoused in terms of a faith commitment, but one which is described according to a process of critical enquiry.[11]

This Post-modern approach to the question of epistemology allows us to acknowledge that realist and anti-realist are 'limiting positions' – ultra-realism and anti-realism are theoretically possible but practically unworkable. There is an element of realism in everyone's philosophical perspective,[12] whilst also

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[10] C. Schwoebel, God: Action and Revelation, (Kaupen, Holland: Pharos, 1992), p83-85, [extracts].

[11] Our proposal is something of an amalgamation of the work of various scholars, each of whom bring particular insights to the debate as a whole. For a survey of the issues see, C. Stephen Evans, Faith beyond Reason, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998). C. Stephen Evans & M. Westphal, (eds), Christian Perspectives on Religious Knowledge, (Grand Rapids, Michegan: Eerdmans, 1993). R.Douglas Geivett & B.Sweetman (eds), Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology, (Oxford: OUP, 1992), Stephen T.Davis, God, Reason and Theistic Proofs, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), P.Helm. Faith and Understanding , (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997). The popular description afforded to such epistemology is 'reformed' of which Alvin Plantinga, and Nicholas Wolterstorff are major exponents; see their Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983). A more 'extreme' exponent of 'reformed' epistemology is Cornelius Van Til – see the discussion in Evans, Faith Beyond Reason, p19-23.

[12] See I.Markham's criticism of Cupitt's alleged anti-realism, Truth and the Reality of God: An Essay in Natural Theology, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998),p47-48, 50. Cupitt would accept much of the criticism, and as Markham acknowledges, to do so would not necessarily deny Cupitt's non-realist theology, although it does suggest that he seek another justification for it.

acknowledging that there is no such thing as an entirely objective world-view, as far as the human subject is concerned.

More than that, we accept Cupitt's view that even if God did exist, humankind cannot speak of God naturally if God is to be the God that Christian theology would want him to be. We consider several of the rebuttal strategies employed against this view, those offered by Stephen Ross White, utilising the arguments of Richard Swinburne and Janet Martin Soskice, but discover that they are as flawed as is Cupitt's main thesis. This leads to the conclusion that revelation is the only category of 'knowing' concerning God that would make it possible for humankind to be engaged directly by God. Such an engagement would have to be in language. Hence the realisation of the need to draw into the discussion the biblical text and to consider revelation in terms of its interpretation.

What now has to be done is to give an account of how the Bible is to be understood in terms of Revelation. Schwoebel provides us with a suitable model, He identifies 5 interwoven aspects of any theological understanding of revelation: its author(A), its situation(B), its content(C), its recipient(D), its result(E). A discloses C in B for D resulting in E. Crucial to our understanding is B, which says Schwoebel, is essentially Christological,

> The Christ event is seen as the paradigmatic disclosure situation in which God communicates Himself to particular persons.[this] implies that God discloses Himself in created reality including its historical structure and its capacity for semiotic interpretation. The Spirit discloses to Jesus' followers the witness of His life and validates it as the truth about their own lives/all reality. The Spirit is not consecutive to the Christ event but constitutive of it...Therefore God's action in the Spirit can be seen as the continuing presence of the revelation of Christ in the Christian community under the conditions of the absence of the earthly Jesus. For the generations who no longer know Jesus according to the flesh the Christ event becomes the

> Gospel of Christ communicated in the word of proclamation, the word of Scripture and the visible words of the sacraments. [13]

Here Schwobel is beginning with what is called Special Revelation, the particular revelation of God in Jesus Christ to which the Spirit bears witness as described in the Bible, both within the narrative itself, and to the Christian community directly although always in accord with the description of such activity recorded in the text. This work of the Spirit in bearing witness to the special revelation of God in Jesus Christ also makes possible a theological realism in terms of General revelation, the reality of God discerned in all that there is; without such a God there would be nothing that is to be so discerned. This causes us to acknowledge that the biblical text is the occasion for revelation rather than revelation itself. The Bible becomes Scripture according to the mediatorial work of the Holy Spirit, 'All Scripture is God Breathed', 2Timothy 3, 16, not in terms of it having been verbally inspired, but rather as a record of that to which the Spirit bears witness; the revelation of God in history, and its appropriation by those who are witnesses to it according to the Spirit.

In chapter 3 we explore this contention by considering how the challenge of a deconstructionist philosophy might be overcome theologically, by considering how Geffre seeks to give an account of realist theology derived in non-metaphysical terms, in so doing indicating how we might rebut the alleged necessary nature of Cupitt's non-realist theology. The importance of Geffre's contribution is his realisation of the necessity of ensuring that any description of God so generated can 'exist' in terms of an external, objective referent. This Geffre does by utilising the category of revelation, acknowledging the importance of the historical dimension, whilst at the same time realising the need to preserve an account of the revealer/revealed in terms of 'dialectic presence' We also

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[13]. Christoph Schwoebel, God, Action and Revelation. P88-89 [extracts].

consider the response of Ovey to the challenge of deconstructive literary theory, taking issue with his view that as Christian theology is necessarily a propositionalist based realist theology, it must necessarily be at odds with any Post-modern critique. We criticise Ovey for his ultra-realist approach to the language of the biblical text. Drawing on the insights of Watson, Keith Ward and Graham Ward we advocate a polyvalent approach to the language of the biblical text, allowing it to be interrogated by its readers/interpreters in terms of its meaning. Our task is to decide how to interpret the biblical text so as to indicate to its readers the reasonableness of an interpretation in terms of realist theology.

Cupitt was not unaware of the significance of the biblical text within traditional Christian theology and in chapter 4 we consider the use he makes of Biblical scholarship during the nineteenth century. Such strategies, albeit susceptible to being exposed as flawed in themselves, were thought by Cupitt to herald the way in which the biblical text would be enquired into within the Post-modern context.

Cupitt's own thought develops as the 1980s unfold culminating in the publication of Creation Out of Nothing[14] - which provides the basis for chapter 5. We concur with his reaffirmation of the conclusion that the limits set for us by language make it impossible for us to speak meaningfully about God, or indeed to speak meaningfully of any alleged supernatural entity. However, now Cupitt is moving forward. No longer is he content to criticise, he seeks to provide a dimension of non-realist theology that generates a perspective within which life may be understood, reconciled and appreciated. Hence his seeking to describe a theologically non-realist doctrine of creation. As we consider his argument we will again identify inherent flaws, flaws relevant to the particular context, but also symptomatic of the flawed nature of non-realist theology generally, whatever the

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[14] (London: SCM, 1990).

philosophical context. In spite of Cupitt's argument, we continue to argue that it remains entirely reasonable to contend that what he puts forward in terms of an understanding of particular Christian doctrines, such doctrines can just as reasonably be described in terms of a realist theology based upon belief in an existing God; a belief inspired by a consideration of the alleged revelation of God as described in the biblical text.

The progression of Cupitt's thought eventually leads us to the way that he argues how a story might be told. This he has set out in his What is a Story?,[15] which is the subject of chapter 6. Cupitt invites us to consider how a text comes to be written; how story and text come to serve as metaphors for understanding the context and content of human living. Christianity is derived from the assertion that the Life of God and the lives of us all are bound into the story which unfolds in a way set down in the biblical text. It is necessary therefore to understand how Cupitt reads the Bible. We will contend that his anti-realist philosophy has restricted his reading unnecessarily. Far from allowing post-structuralist deconstructive literary criticism to have the liberating force he claims for it, Cupitt shackles its impact by imposing presuppositions which are not necessarily demanded by it. We contend that the arguments adduced by Cupitt from the contemporary debate to do with structuralist and post-structuralist perspectives upon texts in particular, and the utilisation of textual analysis as illustrative of defining, understanding and interpreting a general philosophical world-view, are more suited to defending the reasonableness of realist theology, than to supporting his description of theology as non-realist. This is particularly so in terms of the potential for metanarrative. Rather than dismiss the possibility, it is reasonable to assert that realist Christian theology can withstand the challenge of deconstruction, by virtue of the structure of the biblical text, and so confirm the

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[15] (London: SCM, 1991).

existence of the metanarrative, described in terms of God's continuing revelatory encounter within history, rather than as a presupposed metaphysical construct.

Having criticised Cupitt's developing position by confronting his ideas at each stage with what we believe to be an entirely reasonable counter-argument, the thesis now argues that the biblical text is constructed so that it is reasonable to contend that it relates the story of a 'real' God, through the dynamic interaction of purpose, encounter, response and relationship. We base our argument upon an appropriate hermeneutic. This will be done in chapter 7 by considering the historical context from which hermeneutics has emerged. In looking at the way in which hermeneutics was being done around the time of the emergence of the biblical text we find that the 'philosophical' perspective of which Cupitt is consistently critical regarding its corrupting influence upon emerging Christianity was not the only hermeneutic influence that was brought to bear upon the writing of the texts of the New Testament during that time, the compilation of the Christian canon, and the development of interpretative strategies within the various Patristic 'schools' of theology. Our survey of the history of Biblical hermeneutics causes us to realise that at certain times, such an ahistorical philosophical perspective did constrain the interpreting of the texts, although whenever this did happen, it led to a significant reaction. For instance, the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century gained significant momentum as a result of the way in which its leaders came to define, understand and interpret the text of the Bible over against the established methodology of medieval scholasticism. Similarly, the emergence of Post-modern strategies for textual definition, understanding and interpretation are themselves best understood over against the methodology of the modern period. As such we note the emergence of new literary criticism and its challenge to the prevailing historical-critical methodology. We acknowledge that such a challenge should not result in

displacement, but rather a re-alignment in terms of the relative merits of each of the various interpretative methodologies available.

In chapter 8 we consider the contribution of rhetoric and its constituent, accommodation. We demonstrate that the nature of textual interpretation, as it is demanded by any text which purports to describe real historical events in terms of their being illustrative of how we might interpret the events of history as a whole, has to be regarded as dynamically interactive with its audience throughout the whole of history. Our contention is that the application of rhetoric in terms of its accommodative dimension allows the biblical record to be exactly that, and so is revealed to be capable of being understood in terms of the revelation of a God whose self-revelation continues to be encountered in ways the biblical text describes, for as long as the text remains to be read, as long as time remains to read it.[16] To support this general thesis, we consider the way rhetoric, generally, and accommodation, specifically, contributed to the thought world of the Classical period. In particular the way it enabled the early church fathers to develop theological insights based on the revelation of God believed to have been embodied in Christ and recorded as such in Scripture. We will then consider how the Reformation, on account of its embracing the intellectual and cultural revolution known as the Renaissance - itself a rediscovering of that cultural and intellectual tradition which accompanied the emergence of the biblical texts themselves - reacted against medieval scholasticism. In particular

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[16] Against the general hermeneutic backdrop painted in chapter 7; in chapters 8 and 9 we move towards the dramatic conclusion of our enquiry. Can a structuralist argument based on the role of rhetoric be sustained over against the challenge of the post-structuralist critic? Vanhoozer presents us with our script, "Viewing texts as rhetoric – that is, in terms of strategies and techniques of persuasion – leads eventually to consideration of the real readers' responses. We need to distinguish ideal readers, who are internal to the text, from their real, extra-textual counterparts…to shift critical attention from rhetoric to reception is to move from the paradigm of textuality to that of contextuality…It is likely that the needs of twentieth century Baptist Christians in Georgia differ from the first century Galatians who first received Paul's letter…Can contemporary Southern Baptists, or members of some other denomination for that matter, play the role of Paul's ideal reader? Or does one's location – one's gender, race and class – disqualify real readers from ever attaining the ideal?" Is There a meaning in This Text, p150

we will consider the example of John Calvin; how he made use of rhetoric and accommodation in order that the interpreting of the biblical texts might recapture its essential dynamism, borne out of the realisation that a proper response to the message of the biblical text is one described in dispositional rather than propositional terms. We will take these pre-modern insights and note how significant parallels exist between them and the emerging Post-modern strategies for textual interpretation, drawing the inference that therefore, Post-modern interpretation of the biblical need not necessarily be theologically non-realist.

In chapter 9 we consider the extent to which the strategies of the Post-modern period have provided a means by which texts can be defined, understood and interpreted in terms of the texts themselves, and the contexts of their readers. We continue to expose the fact that the critical apparatus Cupitt employs is very much according to the same modernist perspective he confronts in terms of his post-modernist views. This leads to a consideration of aspects of Biblical interpretation currently being applied which provide for this essential dynamism in appropriating the meaning of the text. We consider in particular reader-response criticism,[17] which harnesses the creativity of each reader's response.[18] Having considered the history of reader-response criticism, and having appreciated the controversial nature of its various outcomes, we seek to establish whether the

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[17] When one addresses the whole area of hermeneutics, especially in regard to twentieth century developments, one is immediately aware of the quantity and quality of the work already done in this field. To engage in such an area is a daunting process. Therefore, choices have to be made. The strategy we have adopted is to paint a general historical backdrop against which to consider particular ideas expressed by certain individual commentators. This does not mean that we are unmindful of the controversial nature of such opinions, but our methodology is geared not so much towards the championing of a particular view, as to the advocating of a particular approach. As such, the individuals whose work we consider, are to regarded as illustrative of a way of working, rather than being considered for the nature of their work in itself. Is this not the essence of 'reader-response criticism'?

[18] There are numerous instances in the thesis of references to book reviews, as well as to books themselves. These are direct examples of a particular form of reader response; as the reader takes what he/she believes to be the author's intention as regards the text's ideal reader and evaluates it against the particular response evoked in the reviewer. Indeed some reviews are even more anarchic, choosing to disregard the author's intention, stated or otherwise, and even the text, in order to respond in a way thought consistent with the community of interpretation to which the reviewer belongs!!

structure of the biblical text – rhetoric- can survive the challenge of deconstructive literary criticism. We look at how the structure of the biblical texts allows for particular critical methodologies to be applied, redaction, canonical, narrative, each on their own serving to reinforce the significance of the structure of the biblical text in terms of its interpretation. We consider with Ingraffia, the wider implications of Derrida's particular poststructuralist philosophy. We accept Ingraffia's conclusion that a biblically based realist theology dan withstand the challenge of deconstruction, either in terms of the denial of the transcendental signified – literary, spiritual or philosophical – or the denial of the metaphysics of presence. The Bible, according to its structure, is able to withstand the challenge of deconstruction because of its continued and continuing historical relevance as evidenced in the accommodatory nature of its language. The revelation it describes, as understood within the particular chosen epistemological context suggests the 'obvious reasonableness' of realist theology.[19] This allows it to promote its particular metanarrative - theological realism - as discerned from an interrogation of the biblical text rather then as having been assumed in terms of a 'Logocentrist' metaphysical presupposition.

In chapter 10, we consider what it is appropriate to believe in regard to resurrection. We argue that the 'truth' of the resurrection, albeit built upon an allegedly historical foundation, can never and will never be proved. Therefore, the alleged reality of an existing God can neither be affirmed nor denied with any

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[19] It can be argued that what we have here is a theology of reader-response criticism. We have understood the epistemological nature of the category of revelation to be disclosed within a text structured in such a way that its readers cannot but respondto it in a particular way. This was the situation confronting those whose stories are related in the text as having been so encountered by a self-revealing God. This leads to the thorough-going and all-embracing conclusion that, "Christianity constitutes a world, a reality, a self-defining comprehensiveness that we have to stand within to understand it on its own terms, for to attempt to understand it from outside is to understand it on some other terms – which is to contain it within some other view of the world – and that the Gospel must therefore be critiqued on its own terms. There is nothing that we can bring to bear in judgement upon revelation without making it subject to human judgement which is a contradiction in terms. By definition, revelation is a brute fact. What Post-modern thinking does for us here is to let Christianity be its own judge – to rule out of court all modernist attempts to make Christian beliefs and practices subject to a supposedly universal rationality, ethic or anthropology." S.Patterson, Realist Christian theology in a Post-modern age, (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), p11.

degree of certainty because the description provided of the events surrounding the resurrection of Jesus is purposely structured in such a way so as to deny the possibility of such an approach. This we demonstrate by looking at the work of Sheahan, Dawes, and David Hart, devotees of non-realist theology, and also the work of Demson and Hunsinger, commentators on Barth – a theological realist.

Our final perspective on resurrection will be supplied in terms of a consideration of the texts themselves. It will be a devotional, even a confessional approach. This is because in the end that is all that can be done when faced with the challenge of the biblical text and its interpretation.[20]

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[20] 'God never promises to reveal Himself purely to satisfy our intellectual curiosity. There is one essential condition, and that is honesty. The person who is determined to justify his unbelief will never discover that God is real. But to the one who is honest in his search, honest about his doubts and confusion, honest about his intellectual problems, and honest enough to examine the evidence with as fresh and as open a mind as he can bring to it, God will make Himself known. " Watson, My God is Real, p9.

CHAPTER 1

Don Cupitt: Non-Realist Theology and Christian Believing.

1.Introduction.

It was in Taking Leave Of God[1] - (TLOG) – that Cupitt set out his argument for non-realist theology as a necessary prerequisite for Christian living: as such a work of particular significance.[2] Subsequently, his ideas developed in a number of series of books: the 'Expressivist' series published between 1990 and 1992,[3] whose thesis was predicated on the ideas set out in a series of books published between 1986 and 1989[4], - a 'series of books about faith in the post-modern age.'[5] That series developed the theme begun in TLOG regarding the moral and spiritual development of humankind, a theme which had itself been refined in a series of books published between 1981 and 1985,[6] described as 'Constructivist'.[7]

It requires a separate study to engage critically with the alleged inconsistencies discernible when Cupitt's works as a whole are considered. For some this is sufficient criticism to justify disregarding the ideas themselves. However, Cupitt's own intention was to develop ideas that were only ever provisional. This allowed him to criticise any suggestion that ideas can be 'set in tablets of stone,' and to

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[1] (London: SCM, 1980).

[2] Stephen Ross White, Don Cupitt and the Future of Christian Doctrine, (London: SCM, 1994), p70. For a critical examination of Cupitt's work prior to 1988 see, S.R.L. Clark, *Cupitt and Divine Imagining,* Modern Theology, 5:1, 1988, p45-60.

[3] Creation out of Nothing, (London: SCM, 1990). What is a Story?, (London: SCM, 1991). The Time Being, (London: SCM, 1992).

[4] Lifelines, (London: SCM, 1986). The Long Legged Fly, (London: SCM, 1987). The New Christian Ethics, (London: SCM, 1988). Radicals and the Future of the Church, (London: SCM, 1989). For an interrogation of the ideas central to this series, see, Stephen N. Williams, Revelation and Reconciliation, Cambridge: CUP, 1995), chapter 5, *The Way of Don Cupitt.*

[5] Radicals and the Future of the Church, p5.

[6] The World to Come, (London: SCM, 1982). Only Human, (London: SCM, 1985). Between the publication of these two books, Cupitt produced the television series, The Sea of Faith, broadcast by the BBC in 1984. The title, 'Sea of Faith', is a quotation from Matthew Arnold's 1867 poem, On Dover Beach.

[7] C. Crowder, (ed.), God and Reality: Essays on Christian Non-Realism, (London: Mowbray, 1997), p7.

indicate the problems which have been created within religion generally and in Christian theology in particular by doing just that. Such criticism is therefore methodologically misplaced.[8] Provisionality might breed inconsistency. For Cupitt it provided an opportunity for speculation.

2. According to Cupitt: A Religious Justification of Non-Realist Theology.

Cupitt's controlling idea is that reality is a human creation.[9] His agenda is framed around two questions. a) What does it mean to be fully human? b) How is it possible for anyone to be fully human? Cupitt seeks to demonstrate that humankind cannot be beholden to any other.[10] There can be no self-existing 'real' God because the existence of such a God would deny humankind the opportunity to be what it can be. Religion helps men and women to fulfil their innate capabilities only so long as its language is oriented away from the idea of a self-existing God.[11]

Engaging critically with Cupitt concerning the issue of whether it is reasonable to claim that metaphysical entities - God in particular – exist is to miss the point.[12] For Cupitt this is irrelevant. Even if such a God exists, how can we know, given that God is beyond, outside, external? That is why non-realist theology distances itself from the aridity of the 'theism'/'atheism' debate, preferring to talk in terms of 'religious' and 'secular'.

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[8] White, Don Cupitt , chapters 5 & 6. See also, A. Thiselton, Interpreting God and the Post-modern self, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), chapters 13 & 14.
[9] TLOG p2.
[10] TLOG p3-4.
[11] TLOG p8-10.
[12] K. Ward, Holding Fast to God, (London: SPCK, 1982), sub-titled, 'A reply to Don Cupitt',
B. Hebblethwaite, The Ocean of Truth, (Cambridge: CUP, 1988), sub-titled, 'A Defence of Objective Theism'. Reviewing Hebblethwaite's book, Ian Markham notes that Hebblethwaite argues that Cupitt should resign his orders, an attitude which, according to Markham, arises out of an over emphasis on propositional beliefs. He continues, "If it is that 'by their fruits you shall know them', then there are plenty of overtly damaging forms of Christianity which ought to be rooted out of the Church. At least Cupitt is advocating a tolerant Christianity." Theology, Vol. 92, p210-211.

> Our view of religion as a human creation – let us call it Christian Humanism – still stands firmly in the Christian tradition and sees itself as a legitimate heir to the New Testament. We still find value in its vocabulary, including the word God, and in the Christian stories, especially those of Jesus. A secular humanist, an atheist, has no place for these things.[13]

Put another way,

> The atheist's mistake is to assume that religion cannot survive the recognition that it is a human creation. On the contrary, this recognition is at the heart of a 'responsible religion', and it is made possible by the testimony of the gospel itself to the intimacy of the relationship between the identity of the believer and the identity of God.[14]

Realist theology echoes something of this argument, although the language is different, using 'hiddenness' rather than 'unknowability.' Unknowability, according to its strict meaning, would mean that nothing of God could be known, thereby rendering irrelevant any meaningful discussion of God. 'Hiddenness'[15] conveys the idea that whilst God is potentially 'knowable', God can be known only in terms of revelation. God can be God - beyond, outside, external - yet still be known if it is conceded that God can make Himself known. The question of knowability is also significant in respect of the mode of revelation.

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[13] A. Freeman, God in Us, (SCM: London, 1993), p28.

[14] Crowder, God and Reality, p6.

[15] 'The Hiddenness of God' is an idea connected most usually with Martin Luther. "God as He is in Himself, in His absoluteness, says Luther, sinful man can neither understand nor commune with. Only as He is revealed, (revelatus), dressed and clothed, (vestitus, indutus), in His word and promises can we approach Him" B. Reardon, Religious Thought in the Reformation, (London: Longman, 1981), p89. The question of what Luther meant when using the idea of 'hiddenness' in regard to God - Deus Absconditus - is itself controversial. See, B.A. Gerrish, The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), p132-149. In spite of the dispute over detailed understanding, the general point holds good, and is sufficient for illustrating our particular point. In language more suited to the intellectual climate of postmodernist thought as' W.S. Johnson remarks referring to E.Jüngel, "We must attempt to reconceive the mystery of God. There is no absence without the residue of presence, and there is no presence but that which bears the mark of God's inescapable hiddenness." W.S. Johnson, The Mystery of God: Karl Barth and the Post-modern Foundations of Theology, (Louisville, Kentucky: WJKP. 1997). p21.

> That the recognition of where and how God speaks is *intrinsic* to the Self-Communication of God belongs to the very heart of the Christian Gospel.[16]

It is within the realm of language that revelation must to be encountered. Religion is a phenomenon shared across historical and cultural boundaries, using a common vocabulary within the constraints of individual languages.[17] For Cupitt the issue is the role religious language plays in the lives of those who use it. It underpins the variety of cultural expressions seen within humankind in order to engender a sense of a shared purpose for all. Cupitt deconstructs ontological metaphysics and reconstructs linguistic metaphysics; constrained within human activity, yet transcending individual human expression. This avoids an entirely relativistic perspective on human activity, which with its attendant anarchy would cause it to slide into nihilism. Cupitt is not doing anything new. Pannenberg, discussing Heidegger's contribution in his Identity and Difference, comments,

> Equally inappropriate, according to Heidegger, is the claim that metaphysics as ontology must necessarily be theology. As a result, Heidegger maintained, 'someone who has experienced theology - that of the Christian faith as well as that of philosophy - out of the heritage in which it grew, will today prefer, in the realm of thought, to remain silent about God'. For the onto-theological character of metaphysics has allegedly become questionable. [18]

Cupitt assumes that religion is by nature pluralistic.[19] An exclusivist, or even an inclusivist approach, Cupitt rejects a priori. However, there is nothing necessarily wrong with an exclusivist position - the belief that truth about God is obtainable only by appropriating the revelation of God as described in Christian theology. It has generated a missionary culture built upon the perceived need to convert

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[16] A. Torrance, *The Self-Communication of God: Where and How does God speak,* Annual Conference of the 'Society for the Study of Theology', 1997, p1.
[17] TLOG chapter 5.
[18] W. Pannenberg, The End of Metaphysics and the Idea of God, (ET, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990], p9.
[19] Cf. J.Hick & P. Knitter, (eds.), The Myth of Christian Uniqueness (London: SCM, 1987); and G. D'Costa, (ed.), Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered, (New York: Orbis, 1990). K.Ward, Religion and Revelation: A Theology of Revelation in the World's Religions, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994).

people to Christianity.[20] Cupitt is guilty of a non sequitur when, because he wishes to take issue with evangelical exclusivism, he denies the possibility of the existence of the God in whom such people believe. Similarly, a pluralistic approach does not mean, necessarily, there is no self-existing God. The argument that different religious traditions put forward contradictory ideas regarding the nature and purpose of God can be countered by pointing to the provisional nature of the interpretative function regarding the appropriation of the Divine revelation. If pluralism is understood as advocating the equal validity of all religious traditions as ways of approaching, encountering and relating to God, this does not prevent God being described in terms of realist theology.[21]

Cupitt's understanding of Christian theology invites the conclusion that any meaningful engagement with him can only be in terms of religious language. That will mean investigating the source of its vocabulary in terms of the medium of its reception: the biblical text. The biblical text does not necessarily prescribe the content of religious language, but it does describe the context within which any alleged claim concerning the veracity of extra-biblical religious language might be validated. In the same way, while it is reasonable to contend that the biblical text does not necessarily prescribe the circumstances within which God might encounter one, the biblical text does provide the context within which to validate claims to such an encounter. Our engagement with the biblical text will be in

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[20] See, B. Stanley, The Bible and the Flag - Protestant Missions & British Imperialism in the 19th and 20th Centuries, (Leicester: Apollos, 1990).

[21] A. Torrance, *The Self-Communication of God*, following D'Costa, - *The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions,* in Religious Studies, 32, 1996, p223-232. - argues that any religious position must be 'exclusive'. In footnote 119, p20-21, Torrance considers the view that 'anti-realist relativism as this is endorsed by Don Cupitt' is another alternative to exclusivism. From the perspective which Torrance understands 'anti-realism' he quite properly argues that it is not what it claims to be and that 'exclusivism' remains the only possible typology for considering truth-claims in religion. Even anti-realist sentiments are exclusivist. We will argue that 'anti-realism' is best understood, not as a typology, but as a limiting position over against realism between which all so-called truth claims are made. As a result, that which appears to be overwhelmingly anti-realist remains exclusivist, and must contain at least some degree of realism. To quote Torrance at footnote 120, p21, "...to those anti-realist relativists who believe that the truth is simply 'the state of play', the very advocacy of such a position cannot but make exclusive truth claims of the realist variety. This, of course, should be clear to all those who have not been overcome by sheer cupittity!" Anti-realism does not demand that it necessarily be equated with relativism. Something of an anti-realist perspective can be utilised whilst deriving exclusivist, dogmatic, truth claims on account of the residual realism that must, necessarily be part of the process of making such a claim.

terms of post-structuralism – deconstructive literary theory.[22] This means interpreting the biblical text to discover what it means. It requires abandoning any pre-supposed innerrantism and denying any form of naive fundamentalism. It requires the discovering of the essential meaning of the biblical text; contrasting exegesis and hermeneutics. It is contended that such an approach will affirm the reasonableness of the proposition 'God is'.

According to Cupitt, non-realist theology allows humankind 'to be' because it makes 'autonomy' [23] and 'internalisation'[24] possible. The primary goal of the human subject is to be free, yet to act responsibly in exercising freedom, claiming the freedom to make decisions whilst acknowledging the responsibility attendant upon such decision making. Freedom and responsibility are said to operate in three distinct areas; the intellectual, the moral, and the spiritual. The rise of science is the best evidence of the emergence of free, yet responsible intellectual activity. This in turn provides the backdrop to the more problematic areas of morality and spirituality. As Cupitt's thought develops, this 'scientific backdrop' transforms itself into a 'linguistic panoply.'

3. The Role of Morality in Non-Realist Theology.

For Cupitt, to be truly autonomous each individual must be free to make his/her own rules, to afford relative authority to these rules, and to act consistently according to the choices made.[25] An autonomous morality generates principles,

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[22] Here 'deconstruction' is used as a particular example of post-structuralism. Part of one definition provided is:- "A sceptical approach to the possibility of coherent meaning (initiated by the French philosopher, Derrida). There is no privileged point, such as an author's intention or a contact with an external reality. There is only the limitless opportunity for fresh commentary or text." S. Blackburn, The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, (Oxford: OUP, 1994), p95. See S.D. Moore, Post Structuralism and the New Testament, (Minneapolis: Fortress: 1994), p2-3.

[23] 'Above all, one must not surrender one's inner integrity, and what is integrity, it is one's autonomy.' TLOG p4.

[24] 'The process by which over a period of many centuries meanings and values are withdrawn from external reality and as it were sucked into the individual subject. TLOG p3.

[25] TLOG, p ix. But also, "There is another side of post-modern thought as well. This is the side that is driven by a profoundly moral concern. It points out the contradictions and hypocrisies in dominant cultural assumptions and does so not to revel in the inconsistencies but to use them as leverage to call people to

ideals and values that are thought to be intrinsically good. Framed in rational, consistent and impartial terms they produce a public, socially agreed morality. All external moral claims are discounted or internalised. This is the reason for restating traditional religion - it imposes heteronomous constraints on an individual's moral choices thereby inhibiting moral development.[26] The crisis facing traditional religion is the result of its continuing to function heteronomously in the face of emerging moral autonomy.[27] If religion is to contribute to the lives of individuals then it must become autonomous. This is achieved by abandoning realist theology, internalising its doctrines and adopting 'religious' principles on the same terms as any other principle might be adopted; autonomously, on account of its intrinsic worth.[28]

'Taking Leave of God' is from Meister Eckhart (ca 1260 -1328).[29] Eckhart is writing in the mystical tradition using the 'via negativa', negative theology.[30] Cupitt's interpretation of Eckhart leads him to conclude that the 'God' of whom Eckhart speaks disappears in the face of emerging subjective religiousness. "He even thinks that from this negative theology it 'is only' one step further to the

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account for their own highest and best ideals." W.S. Johnson, The Mystery of God, p5. Where we part company with Cupitt is not in regard to questioning the seriousness with which he addresses the issue, rather it is with his assertion that it can only be addressed in terms of non-realist theology.

[26] TLOG, p xi-xii.

[27] TLOG p8.

[28] For a general consideration of the relationship between morality and religion, see, Peter Byrne, The Moral Interpretation of Religion, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998).

[29] In the frontispiece of TLOG, Cupitt expands the quotation; "Man's last and highest parting occurs when, for God's sake, he takes leave of God.." 'Qui audit me.' For a summary of Eckhart's teaching see, J. Raitt, (ed.). Christian Spirituality Volume 2, High Middle Ages and Reformation, (London: SCM, 1989). p145-155. For a more detailed consideration of Eckhart's work see, E. Colledge & B. McGinn, Meister Eckhart, Classics of Western Spirituality. (New York: Paulist Press, 1981).

[30] The 'via negativa' was first associated with the Neoplatonists, ca 5th century, as a way of reminding people that language is inadequate as far as speaking of God is concerned. It is a way of theological speaking determined by a sense of the utter transcendence of God. Cupitt's use of Eckhart's sentiment - to indicate that non-realist theology is the only possible consequence of the application of negative theology - can be shown to be completely opposite to what Eckhart himself was seeking to convey. cf. Raitt, Christian Spirituality, Vol. 2, p147-148. That is not to say that in more recent times its application has not invited the conclusion that Cupitt has tabled. However, all this does is call into question negative theology as a method for establishing non-realist theology. Within the history of the Christian tradition, its application has usually been accompanied by the use of the 'via positiva'. It is reasonable to suggest that to apply the 'via negativa' in isolation produces a distorted view of what it means to describe God from a human perspective. See the descriptions of 'via negativa' and 'via positiva' provided by E.J. Tinsley in , A. Richardson & J. Bowden (eds.), A New Dictionary of Christian Theology, (London: SCM, 1983), p596-597.

objectively atheous position here propounded."[31] Cupitt's conclusions in respect of negative theology are far removed from the apophaticism of the classical mystical tradition. This is because he pre-supposes an anti-incarnational theology of God. The legacy of the mystical tradition is inherited in terms of the hiddenness of God, rather than non-realist theology.[32] However, there are also similarities between Eckhart and Cupitt which bear directly upon our understanding of the human subject. Turner describes Eckhart's views on 'detachment' as follows,

> To be detached is not therefore to be desireless of creation in order to desire only God, nor is it to desire nothing at all, even God. Rather, it is to desire out of that nothingness of self and God, so that, from the security of this 'fortress of the soul' which nothing created can enter, we can desire all things with a desire truly divine, because it is desire 'without a why'.[33]

Eckhart engages in a critique of 'ego-serving spirituality'. Unlike Cupitt, he avoids the naive polemic engendered between realist and non-realist theologies.

> We need the enabling reflections of the postmoderns to expose the unreality of the present and the death of the modern, self-grounding self in all its myriad forms. We need, above all, the ability of post-modern thought to allow the marginalised ones - especially the mystics - to speak once again.[34]

After TLOG, Cupitt discussed negative theology in the context of Kant's religious thought.[35] He acknowledged Kant's role in the development of ideas concerning the necessity for autonomy within any moral code.[36] Kant shifted the basis of the

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[31] D. Turner, *Cupitt, the mystics and the objectivity of God,* in C. Crowder, (ed.), God and Reality, p120-121. See also his, The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism, (Cambridge: CUP, 1995).
[32] D. Turner, *Cupitt, the mystics and the objectivity of God,* p121.
[33] D. Turner, *Cupitt the mystics and the objectivity of God,* p122.
[34] D. Tracy, On Naming the Present: God, Hermeneutics and the Church, (Orbis: New York, 1994) p17-18.
[35] 'Kant and Negative Theology' in, B. Hebblethwaite & S. Sutherland (eds.), The Philosophical Frontiers of Christian Theology, (Cambridge: CUP, 1982), p55-67. For a thorough critique of the relationship between religion and morality in Kant, see John E.Hare, The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God's Assistance, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), part 1; and Byrne, The Moral Interpretation of Religion, chapters 2-4.
[36] Hebblethwaite & Sutherland, Philosophical Frontiers, p56.

discussion away from the unknowability of the nature and attributes of a God about whose existence we are otherwise certain.[37] Kant contended that it is God's very existence that is unknowable. This led Kant to describe 'God' in immanent terms, entirely constrained by one's reasoning ability.[38] Whilst this cannot be used to argue that God's non-existence has been established necessarily, it does mean that God's alleged existence can contribute nothing to an understanding of the human condition. The human condition is to be understood 'solely' in terms of the exercising of moral autonomy.[39] However the legacy bequeathed by such an outlook is,

> ... A world in which there is no moral providence, life makes no sense, fate is amoral, ironical or malicious and people cannot understand the truth of their own or other people's behaviour.[40] ...Though it can truly be said that Kant's religious views are in the tradition of the negative way, I suggest that our discussion has shown that his position is more bleak and austere than any of his predecessors.[41]

This is why Cupitt is a theologian. One cannot have no theology. The spectre of secularisation invites the nightmare described above.

> What tradition can withstand that power - a subtle, eroding, pervasive power to make all life banal, to empty all time, to remove all difference and otherness? The strange embrace of modern science, technology and industrialism throughout the world has helped to render the present time for many an empty time - bereft of memory, free of hope, powerless to resist. The consumerism of our age is a relentless attack on the soul of every individual and every tradition.[42]

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[37] Hebblethwaite & Sutherland, p58.
[38] Hebblethwaite & Sutherland, p59
[39] Hebblethwaite & Sutherland, p61
[40] Hebblethwaite & Sutherland, p64 - drawing upon The Marquise of O - and other Stories published in 1810-11, issued in translation by D. Luke & N. Reeves. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978).
[41] Hebblethwaite & Sutherland, p64
[42] D. Tracy, On Naming the Present, p6. Tracy quotes H. Richard Niebuhr, [modern Western Christians may well find themselves preaching that], "A God without wrath brought humans without sin into a

Nowhere are these sentiments captured more eloquently than in the poetry of the battlefields of World War One,

Woe to me that I was born in such an age
In which God has been pushed to the horizon;
In consequence man, King and commoner,
Has asserted His hideous authority.
When he felt that God had been exiled
He raised a sword to kill his brother;
The noise of battle is in our ears
And its shadow falls on our poor cottages.
The harps that once gave music
Now hang mute on willow branches;
And the cries of the boys are heard in the wind
And their blood mingles with the rain.[43]

Cupitt appreciates that a totally secular solution is as hopeless as it is bleak and austere. Autonomy is embraced but in terms of internalising its demands, moral and spiritual. Theology is not to be abandoned, but relocated.

Kant however, did not acknowledge that autonomy ought to be set alongside internalisation. The responsibility which constrained the freedom of Kant's human subject was itself external, the 'universal moral law'[44], which merely replaced Deity with another restrictive external constraint. Hence the distinction between autonomy and autarchy, "It is this conception which should properly be called autarchy rather than autonomy that is in dispute between modern atheism and

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Kingdom without judgement through the ministrations of Christ without a Cross." The Kingdom of God in America (1959).

[43] A translation from the Welsh of Rhyfel, by 'Hedd Wyn', Ellis Humphry Evans, (1887-1917), Killed at Pilkem Hill, July, 1917.

[44] See Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, [1785] - According to Blackburn, Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, p57, "Kant discussed five forms of the categorical imperative: (i) the formula of universal law: 'act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become universal law' " According to Blackburn, Kant's 4 other applications of the 'categorical Imperative' are 'the formula of the law of nature; the formula of the end-in-itself; the formula of autonomy; the formula of the kingdom of ends.

modern theology."[45] Autonomy was never meant to suggest that humankind exercise moral choices as absolute subject with absolute freedom and unlimited self-determination. All Kant argued for was regard to be had to a universal moral law which prescribes moral choices while allowing the chooser to be autonomous.[46]

This raises another question. How is it possible for the human subject, given the moral predicament in which he/she allegedly finds him/herself, to make moral choices sufficient to be properly human without the intervention of external authority? Can a human being act autonomously in the way Kant demands? For some this is a point of departure with Kant; his attempt to provide a description of 'radical evil' whilst at the same time asserting that humankind can provide for its own moral regeneration.[47] Michalson notes that Kant refuses to describe evil in terms of ignorance, the Socratic legacy, preferring to utilise Augustinian categories. Kant recasts theism in terms of a moral metaphysic.[48] Kant's dilemma exposes the starkness of the choice available. If an Augustinian approach is applied it must include 'supernatural' intervention. If the possibility of such intervention is denied, then the Socratic type of approach must be applied.[49] The 'modern' theological tradition, a consequence of the Kantian perspective, is caught up in a similarly embarrassing dilemma. That is why it might be argued that theological liberalism is no more than an exercise in the anthropocisation of the Divine, which could never bring itself to its logical conclusion. Kant's call to 'be free' was something that he was never prepared to put himself in a position to

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[45] J. Macken, The Autonomy Theme in the Church Dogmatics, (Cambridge: CUP, 1990) p20.

[46] Macken, Autonomy Theme p3-10.

[47] G.E. Michalson Jr., Fallen Freedom: Kant on Radical Evil and Moral Regeneration, (Cambridge: CUP, 1990).

[48] Michalson, Fallen Freedom, p130-132.

[49]There is another, theological approach, the 'Irenaean' - after Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons. "The Irenaean tradition develops a theodicy which accepts God's partial responsibility for evil. Irenaeus attempts to show the good reasons that made the existence of evil inevitable. He claims that human beings were created as imperfect creatures that had to be brought to perfection by development and growth. Evil was a means to this end. The world with its mingled good and evil is, for Irenaeus part of God's plan and purpose. Irenaeus gives little place to any idea of a fall from perfection and explains evil by looking forward to what is achieved as a result of its presence in the universe. Humans, therefore have responsibility for evil, but are not solely responsible." P. Vardy, The Puzzle of Evil, (London: Fount, 1992), p14.

answer for himself. He was not prepared to let autonomy be free! The dilemma exposed by Michalson is a symptom of another problem that he explores in detail. It is at the heart of Cupitt's thesis, and in turn suggests how we might counter his argument.

> Kant's ultimate inability to reconcile or intelligibly integrate his appeals to human autonomy and Divine action, then, does not betray a failing in the critical philosophy so much as it perhaps heralds a crucial moment in modern theological history. It is the moment when the appeal of translating Christian orthodoxy into something more intellectually palatable becomes so strong that it masks the reasons why such a translation may be self defeating or simply impossible.[50]

According to Michalson, Kant succumbs to the 'temptations of the metanarrative'.[51] Kant is seeking to tell a story. To do so he has to choose his vocabulary. Michalson argues that for Kant there were two competing vocabularies, the language of 'immanent human effort' and the language of 'hidden transcendent action'. Whilst each is very different,

> they share this common grounding in a metanarrative, an implicit trust that their accounts make sense of a totalizing depiction of our total destiny...it never occurs to either thinker that there simply may be no story to tell...They are all telling the Western story of human history after life in the garden.[52]

Cupitt's goal is to establish the futility of such a quest. Autonomy is not simply about having freedom to make decisions. It is to do with the challenge posed by being individual; the responsibility of writing one's own story. Autonomy can only be understood in terms of internalisation. "Kant's problem is that he cannot be content to speak of autonomy: he wants to tell a story about it too."[53] So too,

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[50] Michalson, p133.
[51] Michalson, p134.
[52] Michalson, p134.
[53] Michalson, p135.

Cupitt: autonomy cannot transcend its subjects, for then its subjects cease to be autonomous. Michalson is more cautious than Cupitt in the way he develops his argument. He does not infer from the suggestion that a metanarrative cannot be imposed a priori, that there is no metanarrative, No one metanarrative may suggest itself a priori;

> "The very tendency to tell a story, to employ a grounding metanarrative, turns out itself to be one of the shifting and contingent features of history, just as optional as any of the old style content...The difficulty for this sort of deeper critic is to unmask and interpret the tendencies of the story-tellers without thereby becoming dependent on a totalising narrative of their own that informs and generates the unmasking."[54]

This is Cupitt's dilemma. Indeed, he may well be succumbing to it as he develops his ideas concerning the role and function of language. "A new metaphysics may take the form of a network of such unifying metaphors...I'm after a minimal creed, a post-modernist attempt at reconstruction."[55] As the discussion extends beyond a consideration of Kant's ethical thought to embrace his position within the 'history of ideas', it is possible to argue that the persistence of metanarratives - even when employed in a 'subversive' manner - is due to the fact that this is how it is. Metanarrative is the only way to make sense of reality. Even when recast in secular terms, for example as theories of progress, their underlying perception is teleological because teleology is the key to understanding things as they are, were or will be. Michalson notes that Nietzsche remarked that 'every form of teleology is only a derivative of theology'.[56] Michalson demonstrates how to make sense of this, referring to the work of Hans Blumenberg.[57] Blumenberg draws a distinction between 'content' and 'function' in respect of the way ideas inform about the self and the world. This is underpinned by the basically

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[54] Michalson, _p135.
[55] After All - Religion Without Alienation, (London: SCM, 1994). p7.
[56] Michalson, p136.
[57] The Legitimacy of the Modern Age, trans. R.M.Wallace, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1983); in Michalson, p136-140.

inquisitive nature of human beings, and the attendant priority given to questioning. Where the error occurs is in the assumption that some questions retain an eternal significance. We fail to appreciate the historical contingency of certain 'question positions'. We fail to realise that questions and answers arise out of particular historical situations; not to transcend any and every historical situation, but to inform the particular historical situation. This does not mean that questioning will be redundant, but that we will more properly appreciate its significance, acknowledging that the content of the framework within which questions and answers are dealt with varies with the passing of time. The function of questioning and answering will always retain its essential significance. Hence his distinction between content and function. There is a resonance here with Cupitt's position. Christian theology offers itself to the contemporary world within an outdated framework. It offers answers, but not to questions put by contemporary society because it has failed to appreciate the distinction between content and function. The Kantian legacy, although making a considerable contribution to the development of non-realist theology, fails to achieve that ultimate goal because it did not operate within the wider perspective of philosophical anti-realism.

> With the overriding emphasis on autonomy rather than transcendence, but with autonomy depicted in terms of a narrative requiring an appeal to transcendence for the narrative to achieve closure, Kant's position 'is essentially modern in its content...but heavily affected by Christianity in the function that the content is formed to perform.' His theory of autonomy marks a potentially decisive break away from an outlook we can readily identify as pre-modern, yet his succumbing then to the temptation to give autonomy a journey - about which to tell a story - leaves Kant drawing on the superseded outlook in fumbling ways. Perhaps the most telling feature of Kant's effort to work out a theory of moral regeneration is the fact that he cannot quite figure out how to complete the story in autonomy's own

terms, but has to recall the Biblical idiom in order to avoid the disastrous prospect of leaving the story fragmentary and incomplete. In its drive for satisfaction, reason rounds itself out through an appeal to the very resource it was meant to supplant. In thus having the Bible save rationality and transcendence rescue autonomy, Kant makes his predicament altogether clear.[58]

Secularisation will not do. 'Reducing' the religious to the ethical is of no significance to an understanding of the human condition, which is to do with promoting the freedom and responsibility of the human subject. This is the role of religion. Kant's legacy is the championing of autonomy within the ethical; cutting God free from a necessarily realist ontology within the religious. Failure to pursue internalisation prevented him from realising the fulfilment of the human condition; ethically in particular, religiously in general.

4. The role of Spirituality in Non-Realist Theology.

For Cupitt, the spiritual is as essential as the moral. As with morality, spirituality is only achievable in terms of autonomy and internalisation. The attempt to secularise religion by denying the religious he regards as failed because it equated religion with dependence.[59] Secularisation is wrongly equated with humanity having 'come of age'.[60] Secularisation does not appreciate the spiritual

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[58]Michalson, p140.

[59]TLOG, p1

[60] The context for this phrase is found in Bonhoeffer, "The question is: Christ and the world come of age. The weakness of liberal theology was that it conceded to the world the right to determine Christ's place in the world: in conflict between the Church and the world it accepted the comparatively easy terms of peace that the world dictated." E. Bethge (ed.), Letters and Papers from Prison, The Enlarged Version, (London: SCM, 1971), p327. Bonhoeffer's 'embryonic' theology has encouraged many to claim him as their champion, including secularists, - Cupitt himself refers to him approvingly, see Lifelines, p149, discussing 'militant religious humanism'; Radicals and the Future of the Church, p49, discussing 'the only Christianity we can believe now, & p110, discussing 'strategies for Christian survival'; Creation Out of Nothing, p143, discussing 'a theory of God'. In The Secularisation of Christianity, (London: DLT, 1965), p104, f/n 2, Mascall discusses the position held at that time by Cupitt as described in *What is the Gospel?*, Theology, Vol. 67, 1964, p343ff. 16 years before publication of TLOG, Cupitt's ideas were propelling him down a particular path. "There has for a long time been a distinction between theocentric and Christocentric emphases in Christian Doctrine; but it is now widening into a distinction between theistic and non-theistic

as a positive aspect of what it means to be human. The spiritual is an element of human existence that demands fulfilment. The function of religion is to ensure this happens alongside intellectual and moral development. For this to happen, the nature, role and function of religion has to be internalised,

> All the sources from which our lives are inspired, guided and nourished have in this way to be seen as a welling up within us instead of being an objective pre-existent order into which we have been inserted...We should expect religion to become less a system of externally imposed demands and constraints and more a matter of inner inspiration and guidance.[61]

Likewise it will have to become autonomous; providing evidence of an inner integrity. Just as Kant sought to reconcile autonomy and rationality in respect to ethics, a proper sense of the religious will provide a means of harmonising faith with autonomous freedom in regard to the spiritual. It must be stripped of all its claimed external authority. "The power that brings about inner transformation must be fully internalised until it springs up at the very source of my own affections and will.[62] If the spiritual is to be a positive element in human existence it must internalise such a claim as an a priori practical principle binding to the extent envisaged by Kant in regard to his a priori principle of morality. It has to be acknowledged as coming from within - it cannot 'write its own story'. Cupitt contends we can fulfil our spiritual destiny while satisfying the demands of a fully unified autonomous human consciousness. The high point of such spirituality is attaining the highest possible level of self-knowledge and self-transcendence that displays itself in an attitude of disinterestedness. This is the recognition of the

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interpretations of the Gospel message.' Christian atheism is now a live issue. 'It is now a real question whether the Gospel is basically about God or about Jesus.' " Then, as Mascall observed, Cupitt's own position is firmly on the side of traditional theology, with its conviction that we can have some knowledge of God prior to the Gospel; this he maintains was the position not only of the Apologists but also (whatever the 'neo-orthodox' may say) of St. Paul. 'The Gospel, in short, must presuppose a natural theology.' Here, I believe, he is entirely right. It is, however, ironical to reflect that the extreme revelationism of the Barthians, for whom God was everything and man was nothing, should have led to the Christian atheism for which the man Jesus is everything and God is nothing, in spite of the difficulty which Cupitt remarks, that Jesus Himself both believed in and prayed to God His Father." p 104 -105.

[61] TLOG, p3

[62] TLOG, p5.

intrinsic worth of the living of the religious life; without any thought for anything external to it, either as its source or its reward. "It is spiritually important that one should not believe in life after death but instead should strive to achieve the goal of the spiritual life in history."[63] However, Cupitt's understanding of religion does not necessarily demand to be interpreted in terms of non-realist theology. A sense of the spiritual may be kindled from within and experienced as such. This does not deny the possibility of such an experience resulting in an ontological claim in respect of God; a God whose existence remains unknowable and unverifiable in any objective sense, yet who nevertheless is real to the claimant to the experience. Such an experience may share sufficient common detail with that of other claimants to allow a religious community to develop around the shared aspects of individual experiences. Cupitt is altogether dismissive of the claim that a religious experience can provide grounds for asserting the existence of God.[64] Whether to accept the validity of alleged religious experiences or not is one thing, but one response to Cupitt is that this is how the Christian tradition declares itself. Many within that tradition claim to have had such experiences. Cupitt is not concerned whether God exists or not. The existence of God is irrelevant; the religious requirement still has to be lived out by each individual; internalised, in terms of the autonomy of the human subject.

This invites further consideration of revelation as a source of knowledge about God. It must be considered from the perspective of interpreting the significance of any alleged revelation. An alleged revelation may be of a type which, far from identifying the anonymous source of an otherwise unexplainable mystery, claims to be both personal and relational. Furthermore there might exist a written text purporting to describe the nature and purpose of such revelation, providing the wherewithal by which to make sense of any alleged revelation experienced subsequent to the writing of the text. Cupitt understands this in terms of

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[63] TLOG, p10.
[64] TLOG, p29.

internalisation, expressions of spiritual activity generated within the human subject rather than inspired from beyond. For Cupitt, it is in terms of spirituality that we understand the nature of the religious quest. Therefore it is appropriate to employ religious language to describe, explain and articulate it. God is the unifying symbol representing everything that spirituality expects of us. The requirement to seek out one's spirituality is the 'will of God'; the aspects of spirituality manifest in one's character are the 'attributes of God'; the goal of one's spirituality is the 'nature of God'. This is pure religion.

> Religious activity must be purely disinterested and therefore cannot depend upon any external fact such as an external God. Spiritual autonomy must not on any account be prejudiced. It is spiritual vulgarity and immaturity to demand an extra-religious reality of God.[65]

Philosophy has usurped theology as far as understanding all there is. Truth and reality are the philosophers' gods. Non-realist theology is a necessary consequence of theology having been divested its philosophical clothing. For Cupitt, language about God does not describe an objective reality. It symbolises an element of potential human existence to which to aspire from within. The way such language is used varies according to the circumstances of its users, mythologically, metaphysically, now autonomously. Its 'real' meaning has never altered. It stands over against the user challenging him/her to internalise its meaning and give expression to it from within one's own experience. This is what conveyed by religious language. Within the Christian tradition there is a paradigm example of the internalising of the symbols of religious language, the man Jesus. Hence Cupitt's assertion that he is a true Christian![66] Therefore, non-realist Christianity is the key to the development of a fulfilled humanity allowing

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[65] TLOG, p10.
[66] TLOG, p.xii. Cf. 'his resume of Jesus' message as a non-realist sees it' in Crowder, (ed.), God and Reality, p23.

for the expression of internalisation and autonomy - responsibility and freedom - in every aspect of human activity.[67]

5. The Alleged Inadequacy of Realist Theology in terms of Religion - its Morality and Spirituality.

Cupitt claims that realist theology hampers the development of a truly autonomous human being. That is because it is merely descriptive, encouraging passive acquiescence to purported truth. Non-realist theology is necessarily prescriptive, bound to demand that those who embrace it, actively engage with it. Here Cupitt is guilty of a reductionist non sequitur. Talk about God as He is in Himself, arises out of an encounter by God as He is for us; this does not mean that necessarily, God does not exist.[68] To concede that reason cannot establish the existence of a transcendent being does not mean that such a being cannot exist. However, if such a claim is made from a faith perspective, it should not be accepted uncritically. The reasonableness of the claim is not the same as the reasonableness of the existence of its object. Internalisation, which Cupitt claims is vital to the positive exercising of one's spirituality, can be acknowledged without having to refute the claim that God exists. Internalisation of an objectively existing God still admits the possibility that God exists. Internalisation as part of a person's spirituality is not of itself evidence that such a person is merely projecting internal, ultimate concerns. Such projection can be interpreted as secondary, or derivative; consequent upon having been generated by Divine revelatory activity.

> The humanisation of God [achieved] via an act of incarnation. Incarnation equals the Divinisation of man by spiritual fulfilment. Therefore what is

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[67] This perspective invites comparison with Buddhism. TLOG, p84, where Cupitt develops a position he describes as Christian Buddhism, although he regards such a description of his position as 'incomplete'.
[68] D.A.Walker. *Truth and Objectivity: A Response to Don Cupitt*, Expository Times. Vol. 97/3.,1975 p75-79.

> claimed to be a particular example of anthropocentrism may equally validly be understood as theology via articulation/experience of Divine revelation by analogical projection in dialectical response rooted in a gracious encounter.[69]

Cupitt argues that realist theology prevents the development of an autonomous human being, made complete with the internalisation of the spiritual dimension, which is at the heart of being human. This is not necessarily so. It may be that a particular application of realist theology does prevent such development, but that is only one particular application. It is reasonable to contend that a different application can provide what is necessary for anyone to be fully human. Such an application is as readily described in terms of Incarnation as in terms of anthropomorphism. Emerging moral autonomy, and deepening personal spirituality can be understood in terms of realist theology, provided it facilitates a description of the way in which God engages with humankind. It may even provide a far richer understanding of the human condition, actually and potentially, than non-realist theology could ever provide.

6. <u>Confronted by the God of Non-Realist Theology.</u>

We can sum up Cupitt's position as follows: humankind's crossing of the threshold of modernity, the ability to explain creation in scientific terms, the ability to generate knowledge from within, the ability to regulate social structures from within, the ability to understand the self as self-defining as opposed to pre-determined - has led to God becoming redundant. This is the practical consequence of understanding emerging autonomy as the foundation of human existence: autonomy expressed in terms of the ethical and spiritual dimensions of existence. Traditionally, belief in God as an external objective reality has led to

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[69] Walker, *Truth and Objectivity* – following Dulles, revelation as a dialectic of presence, as described in the introduction, p

other explanations being provided for these phenomena. Modernity, argues Cupitt, has revealed these explanations to be illusory, their source a fiction. It is not a case of, 'no longer God' but, 'God has never been'. We can appreciate the significance of such a contention as a positive move in the development of the human condition, opening up the possibility of a truly religious dimension being enjoined as we develop the spiritual within ourselves.

I intend to draw only very modest conclusions. It is certainly wrong to say categorically that the arguments are all invalid, and the existence of God cannot be proved. You could only say such a thing if the arguments could be stated in definitive forms, and in those forms shown to be, conclusively valid or invalid...So the history of the debate does not entitle us to conclude with certainty that God's existence is either provable or unprovable. But I suggest that it does indicate some decline in confidence in the proofs and some movement away from theological realism.[70]

For Cupitt the main issue is not whether this debate is concluded one way or the other, but that its outcome is inconsequential in respect of a person's spiritual development, which is the proper stuff of religion.

> We can appreciate the harsh dilemma facing would-be contemporary theology. The theologians begin from orthodoxy, but the orthodoxy...becomes too easily a closed circle, in which believer speaks only to believer...Turning aside from this arid in-group theology, the more perceptive theologians wish to translate what they have to say to an atheistic world. But they are doomed to one of two failures. Either they succeed in their translation; in which case what they have been saying themselves has been transformed into the atheism of their hearers. Or they fail in their translation; in which case no one hears what they have to say but themselves.[71]

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[70] TLOG, p32.
[71] A. MacIntyre, *God and the Theologians,* Encounter: Sept., 1963. Quoted by Cupitt, TLOG, p35.

Cupitt concludes that realist theology is irrelevant to religion. Careful consideration of Cupitt's position, whilst noting that we are not bound to share his basic contention - the necessity of theology being non-realist - will allow the question posed by MacIntyre to be answered from the perspective of realist theology. Cupitt's ideas crystallise around the dynamic nature of language. Any response has to be in terms of the way language ought to be interpreted.

> The non-realist [claims] that the distinctively religious use of language about God, if we really grasp how it works, strictly requires us to let go of any suggestion that this language refers to something other than the contents of our minds and our language.[72]

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[72] R. Williams, in C. Crowder, (ed.), God and Reality, p.v.

CHAPTER 2

Don Cupitt: Religious Language & Christian Believing.

1. Introduction.

Cupitt locates non-realist theology within philosophical anti-realism.[1] However, non-realist theology does not require philosophical anti-realism.[2]

> For instance, Iris Murdoch, believing that moral conduct is rooted in a natural desire for truth and goodness, conceived in Platonistic terms as transcendent realities which we have to discover, with effort and training, endorses realism in ethics. But she favours non-realism in theology because she cannot believe in an objectively existing quasi-personal being who might become incarnate in our history.[3]

On the genesis of anti-realism,

> It was Kant's analysis of the operation of reasoning that led to the creation of the two main joists of twentieth-century anti-realism...Our perception of the world is always a creation of certain dispositions and faculties which constitute our consciousness of things. Judgements are made. And within this philosophical framework, both the sociology of knowledge and linguistic idealism were developed.[4]

Cupitt is said to reflect something of the inevitability of this post Kantian legacy himself,

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[1] A 'journey mapped out' in Lifelines (LL), (London: SCM, 1986)

[2] See S. Blackburn,*Realism/Anti-Realism* Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, p319-320. "The observation that 'anti-realism', is the context within which philosophical and hermeneutical pluralism is able to flourish, although bound inevitably to succumb to an essential fragmentation is particularly apposite. 'Anti-realism' is basically ontological 'non-realism'". D.A. Carson, The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism, (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), p19.

[3] F. Kerr, *What's wrong with Realism anyway?*, in C. Crowder, (ed.), God and Reality; Essays on Christian Non-Realism, (London; Mowbray, 1997), p129. See also, I. Murdoch, Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals, (London; Chatto & Windus), p452-453, 455-456.

[4] G. Ward, *Theological Materialism* in C. Crowder, God and Reality: p143.

Taking Leave of God is written under the shadow of Kant, and its themes, such as 'autonomy', 'internalisation', and 'self-transcendence' bear witness to its investment in a distinctively modern concept of the human subject...the shift from a characteristically modern concept of the self to a distinctively post-modern one is fundamental...the post-modern shift entails the death and dispersal not only of the old God, but of the old humanity too - the free, autonomous individual of Taking Leave of God, for example.[5]

Cupitt confronts 'realism' with 'anti-realism'. In medieval philosophy, realism was confronted by nominalism; denying the alleged existence of universals by arguing that only particular things exist.

> The Realists followed Plato in holding that universals were real. The things that we see and touch are really copies of an eternal archetype that in some way has brought them into being. The Nominalists took the opposite view. They rejected the idea of universals altogether. They believed that there was no such thing as 'goodness' or 'greenness' apart from particular 'good' or 'green' things, and that all such general abstract words are merely a way of speaking.[6]

This prompted one description of nominalism, "Different schools of thought whose sole, common feature was anti-realism."[7] For medieval nominalism, the issue was the reality of universals. Another way of describing its approach is 'Termism' - a thing is real as a thing, but remains 'anything' until it has a 'term' or 'name' affixed to it. This is a reasonable description of nominalism, but as such is a form of realism.[8] Then there was 'Conceptualism':

> The Conceptualists steered a middle course. They took the view of Aristotle that universals do, in fact, belong to the realm of thought; but that

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[5] C. Crowder, God and Reality, p8&9.
[6] C. Brown, Philosophy and the Christian Faith, (Downer's Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1968), p18.
[7] A. McGrath, Reformation Thought (2nd ed.) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p73
[8] See , T.F. Torrance, The Hermeneutics of John Calvin, (Edinburgh; Scottish Academic Press, 1988).

they also stand for something which is actually there which gives unity to the diversity of the world of our experience.[9]

Realism perceives the reality of objects in 'terms of' an actual objective existence independent of individual subjective perception. Anti-realism argues that the perception of reality is only possible because reality is a product of perception.[10] This description of anti-realism appears logically impossible unless the perceiver is able to create out of nothing. This is a form of theological realism – in that there must be at least one self-existing reality – a Deity. Hence the following,

> A particular anti-realist rejoinder asserted that objects may well be essentially independent of all human minds but dependent on infinite mind or Deity. The word 'essential' is necessary. Realism is not refuted by demonstrating a causal or contingent relationship with mind, as long as it is inessential to the thing.[11]

However, a theologically realist constrained philosophical anti-realism raises difficulties of its own,

> Realism places a gap between mind and reality...Real objects transcend the contents of our experience. Realism asserts that material objects and theoretical entities are more than the experiential content of our minds; that social phenomena are more than the individuals who participate in them; that universals are irreducible to the particulars of which those

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[9] Brown, Philosophy and the Christian Faith, p19. Brown describes Conceptualism as 'moderate realism'. Blackburn defines 'Conceptualism' as "The theory of universals that sees them as shadows of our grasp of concepts. Conceptualism lies midway between out-and-out nominalism holding that nothing is common to objects except our applying the same words to them, and any realism which sees universals as existing independently of us and our abilities." Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, p72.

[10] T. Honderich, (ed.), *Realism,* Oxford Companion to Philosophy, (Oxford: OUP, 1995), p746-748. Using 'Perceptivism' as the criterion for determining the extent of the 'realist'/'anti-realist' divide invites a particular theological conclusion, "To the extent that the Holy Spirit is the means of the perception of the revelation of God in Christ, the event of revelation includes within itself the essential grounds for the recognition of Christian truth. Its essential criterion, therefore includes that specific self-authenticating perception that is the presence of the Spirit. It is thus inherent within the very nature of Christian revelation that it is neither anticipatable nor endorsable from any prior or independent set of conditions or foundations." A. Torrance, *The Self-Communication of God: Where and How does God Speak?,* p2.

[11] J. Urmson & J. Ree (eds.), Concise Encyclopaedia of Western Philosophy and Philosophers, (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p273-274.

universals are true. But if real objects transcend experience, how is knowledge of reality possible?[12]

This dilemma invites Cupitt to argue for the non-existence of God without having to jettison the residual realism necessary for making sense of the material world. It is reasonable to argue that the reality of things cannot transcend one's experience of them. Knowledge of reality is possible because things are 'realised' by us according to our perception of them; a perception subsequently refined according to an appreciation of such perception in terms of its impact on the perceiver. Consequently, the reality of God can never be perceived because for God to be God, God must transcend human perception and therefore be imperceptible. However, we may reply this does not render God 'unknowable'. Knowledge is not necessarily limited to what can be perceived. God can be 'known' while being 'imperceptible'. Therefore imperceptibility does not necessarily equate to unknowability. God is potentially knowable through revelation. Cupitt may deny the legitimacy of revelation as a source of knowledge thereby limiting knowledge to that which can be perceived, but it is only according to the criterion of perceptibility that Cupitt's anti-realism can operate. He argues that the priority is with the perceiver over the perceived. The perceiver realises what he perceives through the description he provides of it, rather than acknowledging that what is perceived, of itself determines how it ought to be described.

This epistemological wrangling between 'realism'/'anti-realism' is better resolved by seeing each as ultimate expressions, 'limiting points' within which any perceiver describes their perception of reality. Within such limits, theology operates.[13] Every perception contains an element of realism, though it may be

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[12] D. Hillel-Rubin, *Realism,* in Urmson & Ree (eds), p274.

[13] This conclusion echoes that of Barth. "Barth used the terms 'fate', or 'destiny' (*Schicksal*) and 'idea' (*Idee*) to signal the twin horizons of all intellectual endeavour, the "double determination' of every 'act of thinking' (*Denkakt*), and every 'act of living' (*Lebensakt*). We have no choice but to live out our 'ideas' and to think through our 'destinies'... Too often these concepts have been reified and turned into systems, the clashing 'isms' of 'realism' and 'nominalism', or 'romanticism' and 'idealism'. Johnson, The Mystery of God, p27,

minimalist. Non-realist theology is reasonable, but a non-realist ontology cannot be sensibly described, and therefore cannot establish the necessity of non-realist theology. On the other hand, a theologically constrained anti-realist philosophy is a sensible proposition, provided it can be established as reasonable that God reveals the reality of Himself in such a way that He can be appropriated by the human subject within the context of human experience. The reality of an otherwise imperceptible God, so revealed, is thus able to be perceived according to the criterion of perceptibility, which prescribes the epistemological activity of the human subject within the limits provided by thoroughgoing realist and anti-realist positions.

2. According to Cupitt: Religious Language within an Anti-Realist Perspective.

Following TLOG, Cupitt continues to explore what it means to be truly human in terms of autonomy and internalisation, freedom and responsibility.[14] Religion provides a framework/matrix/milieu/context/environment serving to balance the tension between a call to be free and a demand to be responsible. Critical to this is an appreciation of what is human. Any description of the human condition emerges out of the human condition itself. For Cupitt, the human condition can only be described from a human perspective. The perceptibility or otherwise of 'things' being determined according to their being so perceived by the 'thing' which is the human subject; the reflexive nature of human self-perception is crucial to being human.[15] Religious language has to be re-oriented towards this particular way of understanding the human subject. To illustrate this, Cupitt contends that there is within each one the 'life-force' which drives us on - that

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echoing Barth's *Fate and Idea in Theology,* in M. Rumscheidt, (ed.), The Way of Theology in Karl Barth, ([ET], Zurich: EVZ, 1957), p25-62. CF. T.F. Torrance, Karl Barth: An Introduction to his Early Theology, 1910-1931, (London: SCM, 1962), p149-180. Johnson, The Mystery of God, p27-35.

[14] The theme of Only Human and The World to Come

[15] Reflexivity is the ultimate refinement of subjectivity. M.C. Taylor, Erring: A Post-modern A/theology, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1997), p38-42.

which motivates whilst recognising that life is a shared experience, out of which emerges identities of society and culture.[16] Religion allows us to be reflexive in respect of individual humanity while exposing us to the fact that humanity is more than 'mere' collective individuality. This tension is reconcilable only by intra-human communication, using language. We must be able to articulate our perceptions of individual and communal selfhood. Religious language facilitates this articulation. This allows the individual to function in community as well as to reflect on what it means to be an individual within community. [17]

For Cupitt, any realist philosophy fails to acknowledge that the human realm is linguistic and relativistic. The claimed existence of mind independent reality according to which there is available knowledge of any thing as it is in itself is incredible. At the centre is language, not being. Language does not mirror external reality; it is the medium by which reality is created. Outside of language is nothing but what Cupitt describes as meaningless flux.

> Experience minus language is a preconscious inhuman unthing, pure chaos. Perhaps before I was inducted into the world of signs something that was before me did live immediately up against the flux of raw uninterpreted unformed sensation.[18]

This is Cupitt's residual realism, his way of describing how reality is established. For Cupitt, existence is to be explained in terms of scientific hypotheses; he has no doctrine of creation as such.[19] At the heart of Cupitt's position is the human

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[16] The theme of The Long Legged Fly. (London: SCM, 1987)

[17] In LLF, Cupitt emphasises the role of reflexivity, drawing on the work of, H.Lawson, Reflexivity: The post-modern Predicament, (London: Hutchinson, 1985)

[18] CON, p21.

[19]That is not to say that the doctrine itself has not been subject to 'revisionist' tendencies within theological debate. "The priestly account of creation in Genesis Ch. 1 talks of the creative Spirit of God hovering over the water. Out of that primeval chaos God creates ex nihilo. In our dying and death, where the homeostasis of our bio-system disintegrates and deteriorates into chaos, God is at work again in a new creation ex nihilo." In a footnote the writer observes, "I do not understand 'creatio ex nihilo' as God producing previously non-existent matter out of thin air in the manner of a conjurer. Rather I take it to mean the producing of order, pattern and system out of chaos. Of course we ought to note in passing that the conjurer herself does not produce things out of thin air!" P. Sheppy, *He Descended to the Dead,* Theology Themes, Vol. 1, No. 2, (Manchester: Northern Baptist College, Autumn, 1992), p25. In 'creatio ex nihilo' there is no thin air out of which anything could be conjured.

subject, conferring meaning upon that which is otherwise meaningless. Language relates to existence by making it meaningful, thereby creating reality. Language describes this reality in communicable terms. There is no reality outside language. Language is primary, reality is secondary. Therefore, if an allegedly self-existing God is to become real, such reality will have to be able to be described in language. Cupitt argues that any claim to speak meaningfully of God is incredible because of the language used to describe God: describing God as transcendent locates God beyond human experience, beyond human language. Such a charge can be rebutted by tabling the particular understanding of revelation we described earlier, revelation described in terms of epistemology.[20] However, Cupitt is not saying that religious language is meaningless. Religious language has a significant role to play within human experience, yet its meaning must derive from within that experience. As far as realist theology is concerned however, to suggest that it is impossible to speak meaningfully of a mind-independent, self-existing God is an appalling prospect.[21]

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[20] "A doctrine of Revelation ought not to be conceived of as an epistemological theory but as an account which justifies a set of Christian convictions concerning God's gracious identity and reality. It seeks to demonstrate neither the necessity of Christian theism, nor the impossibility of atheism. It does assert the intelligibility and truth of Christian claims and thus invite discussion and debate. [It is] a reasoned theological account of faith and hope." R.F. Thiemann, Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise, (New York: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), p7 Our understanding of both categories does not invalidate the conclusion reached here, in spite of Thiemann's own conclusion. Indeed, is not, 'a reasoned theological account of faith and hope' iitself a 'reasonable' description of a fideistic epistemology.

[21] "The question of God is a religious question, one that Christians in some way share with peoples of all religions, and even of no religion at all. The question of God arises out of the human quest for meaning; it is, thus, a structural dimension of human existence. Statements and symbols about God function to answer questions concerning the nature and destiny of human existence...This new-style natural theology stops short of claiming to possess definitive knowledge of God and God's will unto salvation, on which the life of faith, hope and love is founded. But it does ground the meaning of the idea of God in the structures of common human experience. It is starting theology 'from below', from the side of the human subject inquiring into the possibilities of meaning into existence and history. It does not begin 'from above', from the sheer datum of revelation...The partial meanings in our experience cry out for a final and total context of meaning." C. Braaten, *The Problem of God Language Today,* in C. Braaten, (ed.), Our naming of God: Problems and Prospects of God-Talk Today, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), p21. Arguing this way, Braaten makes Cupitt's case for him. Revelation is a way of explaining God's gracious activity, grace that can only be understood as prevenient. To afford priority to the 'subject' is to deny the possibility of prevenient grace. This invites the possibility of 'God' fashioned according to the pre-established perspective of the subject, even when alleged divine revelation is adduced as 'evidence' to support the conclusion.
"Less evident, but no less important, is the close tie between modern humanistic atheism and its apparent opposite, Reformation theology...For many people who were less dialectical than Luther, however, the notion that Christ is always *pro nobis* signalled a significant shift towards the centrality of the self. From this point of view, the emphasis on individual salvation suggested that *human* concerns lie at the centre of

3.Contra Cupitt: One Possible way of using Religious Language in terms of Realist Theology.

Cupitt could be said to have failed to understand how realist theology uses religious language. He appears to assume it is a 'one-to-one' correspondence with an external reality; describing God by making a copy of God in language[22].

> [Implicit in all these questions] is the rather widespread belief that truth involves some form of correspondence between language and reality, that

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the divine, and therefore the cosmic purpose." Mark C. Taylor, Erring; A Post-modern A/theology, (Chicago: Chicago University press, 1984), p21.

In response to Braaten, realist theology demands a theology from above. Such an approach is not 'merely' a defence of realist theology, it is the 'natural' conclusion to reach from a consideration of the biblical text. "In Revelation & Theology, Thiemann argues that denying some reality beyond the realm of human language is incompatible with Christian belief in Divine prevenience. Christians, Thiemann maintains, need to assert that our Christian speaking and acting all respond to a prior initiative from God, and it is not clear that a cultural-linguistic model which denies the legitimacy of reference outside the world of our language can make sense of anything that precedes our speech and action." W.Placher, *Paul Ricoeur and PostLiberal Theology: A Conflict of Interpretations?* Modern Theology, 4:1, 1987, p49.

[22] A Correspondence theory of truth is thought to go with a realism as opposed to a Coherence theory of truth that is thought to go with anti-realism. See, Reality and Representation, D. Papineau, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), Ch. 8, p149-151. As with the realism/anti-realism debate, there are many 'variations on a theme', "There is a spectrum of correspondence theories of language ranging from one word corresponding to one object to language as an external symbolic form which represents the internal experience. All these forms distinguish, with varying degrees of correspondence, an internal and cognitive aspect and an external reality. Language in all correspondence theories acts as a medium, a third order. They are all representational views of language." G.Ward, *Theological Materialism*, in C. Crowder, (ed.). God and Reality; Essays on Christian Non-Realism, (London: Mowbray, 1997) p159, note 6. - How can God be talked of in representational terms? How does one provide a description of God, when by definition God transcends the realm within which such description needs must be provided? – Ward concedes the impossibility of this particular approach while at the same time realising the need for a more general one. "It is important that theology accepts both its anti-foundationalism (a correlative of the freedom, magnitude and alterity of the divine) and (in order for it to remain theology rather than some subset of anthropology) a realism concomitant with traditional notions of revelation and incarnation." Ward, *Theological materialism,* p157. There is a need to preserve an element of correspondence as far as the alleged truth of religious language is concerned, just as there is to preserve an element of philosophical realism as far as the alleged existence of the object of religious language is concerned. "The collapse of epistemological foundationalism may mean that we cannot justify our truth claims by non-inferential, self-evident arguments; but it does not follow that we can no longer make historical or ontological claims to the truth. Since these truth claims take the form of promises of God, their justification has an inevitable prospective or eschatological dimension." Thiemann, Revelation and Theology, p93-94 "Christian ontological truth claims are made in the activities of adoration, proclamation, obedience, promise-hearing and promise-keeping which shape individuals and communities into conformity with the mind of Christ...Truth and falsity characterise ordinary religious language when it is used to mould lives through prayer, praise, preaching and exhortation. It is only on this level that human beings linguistically exhibit their truth or falsity, their correspondence or lack of correspondence to the ultimate mystery." G.Lindbeck, The Nature of Doctrine, (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1984), p64

words - if they are to be received as true - must somehow correlate with or correspond to an extra-linguistic state of affairs.[23]

Cupitt's critics argue that he fails to appreciate that within realist theology religious language is also used analogically and metaphorically thereby allowing reference to something without defining it.[24] This involves 'imagination' - the capacity to put into words the meaning that a word or act expresses.[25] However, even if it was established that religious language used metaphorically could speak meaningfully of God, some external referent would have to be available to define the words being used metaphorically. If not, any reality purportedly described in terms of metaphor may be nothing more than a metaphorical representation of another reality. This may be able to be overcome in terms of two dissimilar, immanent entities, but not when one entity is 'described' as a priori transcendent. Metaphor cannot of itself establish correspondence with an a priori transcendent entity without some other external referent concerning that entity.[26]

This analogical/metaphorical approach is adopted by Stephen Ross White in his defence of realist theology[27]. White uses the argument of Richard Swinburne,[28]

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[23] J. Fodor, Christian Hermeneutics, (Oxford: OUP, 1995), pvii-viii.

[24] Cupitt does discuss the place of Metaphor within an overall understanding of language in LLF, chapters 5&6.

[25] D. Tracy, The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism, (London: SCM, 1981), p128. cf. G.Kaufman, The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981) .Thiemann's analysis of Kaufman can be summed up as follows: The source of theological concepts is the human imagination and not Divine revelation. Theological thinking proceeds according to three formal and universal aspects, i) The construction of a concept of world. i.e. the context within which all experience falls. ii) Via an imaginative leap, the creating of an idea of 'god' which limits and relativises the world. iii) World and experience are reconceived in the light of this concept of 'god'. Thiemann, Revelation and Theology, p49-56. According to Thiemann, Kaufman's methodology can be described thus, "The criteria by which theological claims are to be assessed are not those of correspondence but are thoroughly pragmatic in character. What has come to be known in theology as 'imaginative construction'" - Thiemann p51. An interesting echo of C. Crowder's summative description of Cupitt's thought as 'Constructivism'!!

[26] "Because Deity is at once transcendent and wholly other while immanent and incarnational in Christian understanding, we have no choice but to use what David Tracy calls the analogical imagination to name God, in which case we are landed in the territory of simile, metaphor and story; this is the domain of poetry. Hence the peculiar incarnational theism of our tradition forces us to use forms of language that are poetic in that they are metaphorical and/or analogous." Braaten, Our Naming of God, p128.

[27] S. Ross White, Don Cupitt and the Future of Christian Doctrine, (London: SCM, 1994), Ch. 7. p178f.

[28] R.Swinburne, Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992).

who refers to certain credal affirmations - e.g. Jesus' 'ascending', and 'descending'- as metaphors illustrative of Ascension and Incarnation, rather than as actual descriptions of spatio-temporal movement. Swinburne's argument is that just because the words do not convey literal truth, that is not the same as saying that there is no truth in them at all.[29]

Metaphor is capable of imparting cognitive information - it has real cognitive status - although not in a literal sense. Thus in the creeds we are given real and meaningful information about, for example, Christ and His work both in Incarnation and Ascension, but not in a literal, physical sense of movement up and down in space; and metaphor succeeds in enabling us to 'picture' - and indeed to understand - both Incarnation and ascension more clearly than the constraints of more literal language would succeed in doing. It may be argued, therefore, that metaphor not only has real cognitive status, but that on occasion it may actually be a more effective vehicle for imparting conceptual understanding than literal language.[30]

Metaphor can help in understanding complicated concepts but metaphor does not convey anything of the reality of such concepts. To talk of Incarnation in terms of 'coming down' may help in understanding Incarnation but it does not explain what Incarnation means. The literal assertion of Jesus 'coming down' may be actually meaningless; it is equally meaningless when invoked as a metaphor for Incarnation. It is not that 'coming down' does not help in understanding Incarnation, but it does not provide a meaningful description of Incarnation. Whether 'coming down' refers to action or concept, the meaningfulness of the action or concept has to be established. It can be argued that the creed is a metaphor. Everything following the initial affirmation, "I believe in God" - e.g. "The Father almighty etc." - is a metaphorical representation of that initial affirmation. There is no external referent according to which its validity as a

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[29] Swinburne, Revelation, p159-161.
[30] White, p181.

truth claim might be investigated, except the clause, 'I believe' - a personal 'statement of faith', 'analogous' to what Carl Braaten has termed Paul Tillich's 'belief-full realism'.

> The knowledge of faith is real knowledge of God that comes to expression in forms of language that refer to events and interpretations that faith sees as originating in God's revelation and that it claims as its basis and contents.[31]

Without utilising the category of revelation it is not possible to use Swinburne's argument to support the contention that religious language, understood metaphorically, can describe God. This is however, unsatisfactory as far as White is concerned, because White is seeking to counter Cupitt's argument that language cannot immediately describe 'a priori transcendent entities, regardless of whether they exist or not.

White then appeals to Janet Martin Soskice.[32] Soskice considers Cupitt's assertion that, 'when Christians say that "God is Spirit" they are "giving a description of God" '.[33] For Soskice, this indicates Cupitt's misunderstanding of the distinction between referring and defining. Her response is that, 'when Christians say that God is Spirit they are not defining God.'

> This use of 'Spirit' is one which sits in a particular context and tradition; its sense is not given by rigid definition, but by considering the way in which the term is variously used in the community and tradition, and importantly the way it is used in Christianity's sacred texts.[34]

Yet, if a sentence is referring rather than defining, what is being compared to what in order to describe what is involved? There is still no external referent. This difficulty becomes more obvious when examining Soskice's argument in detail.

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[31] Braaten, Our Naming of God, p14.
[32] J.M. Soskice, Metaphor and Religious Language, (Oxford: OUP, 1985).
[33] Soskice, Metaphor, p153.
[34] Soskice, p153-154.

The naive theological realist is one who maintains that Christian worship 'is undeniably addressed to one other than the worshippers, a King of the universe who makes all things, knows all things and rules all things a cosmos-transcending absolute Being.' The crucial objection to religious realism, he (Cupitt) says 'is that insofar as it succeeds in being realistic it necessarily ceases to be religious.' [35]

Soskice argues that according to Cupitt, realist theology fails because seeking to prove God exists is bound to fail. It is meaningless to talk of a being who by definition is beyond experience, one who is 'pure Spirit' – understanding God in terms of what God is not. God is not a thing; God is nothing. Such an understanding makes it impossible to provide an immediate description of God. For anyone to be able to know anything of God immediately, God would have to be less than God as so described. This argument derives from logical positivism.[36] To claim to believe in God suggests an ability to give an account of what it means to say 'God exists'. At this point, believers assert that language is at best approximate, even inadequate. If so, how can a believer claim to believe anything?[37] We cannot know what it means,

> to suppose that there can exist a being that is pure spirit and nothing else. For how can there be a pure, subsistent relation of transcending without any 'matter' or nature that is transcended? It seems not to make sense to say that the transcending is the nature. So it appears that we are forced back to the point from which we began, namely that for us there is no God but the religious requirement: the imperative Become spirit! is the

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[35] Soskice, p142. The quotes from Cupitt are from TLOG, p67 & 45.
[36] Logical Positivism is a development of Positivism; a thoroughgoing empiricism seeking to avoid any tendency towards idealism or scepticism. It is credited to Comte, (1798-1857), for its introduction. He argued for an understanding of human belief in terms of successive phases; the theological, the metaphysical and the positive. Blackburn, Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, p294, *Positivism:* p223-224, *Logical Positivism.* Hence its resonance with the position held by Cupitt.
[37] Soskice, p142-143, referring to Ayer's position in The Central Questions in Philosophy, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p211-212.

presence of God within us, and for us it is God, it is the goal as well as the requirement.[38]

According to logical positivism, God must be entirely immanent or utterly transcendent.

To say something transcends human understanding is to say that it is unintelligible. And what is unintelligible cannot be significantly described...If one allows that it is impossible to define God in intelligible terms, then one is allowing that it is impossible for a sentence both to be significant and to be about God.[39]

Soskice accepts the positivist challenge, and turns to metaphor as a basis for understanding religious language; mindful that such an approach must be able to establish the validity of any cognitive truth claims made within the context of realist theology. However, she concedes that language employed metaphorically produces constructs "without any pretension to depict a reality independent of the human condition".[40] It may be that, “Religious language is entirely intelligible and moreover, can be grounded empirically within an individual's religious language game”.[41] Such intelligibility is at the expense of the transcendent, producing a 'linguistic empiricism', synonymous with a 'linguistic idealism'. Soskice then considers 'Christian empiricism'; the outcome of an experience which 'speaks' directly concerning the propositional content of Christianity. If religious language was to be accepted as containing any sense of cognitive truth claims then, "Somewhere or other they must encourage us to appeal to 'what is the case' ".[42] Such an appeal could be in terms of 'cosmic disclosure', hence "the

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[38] Cupitt, TLOG, p90-91, quoted by Soskice, p143.
[39] Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p156; quoted by Soskice, p144.
[40] Soskice, p145.
[41] See Phillips' essay, *Religious Beliefs and Language Games,* in B. Mitchell (ed.), The Philosophy of Religion, (Oxford: OUP, 1971), p121-142. Cf. his contribution to J.Runzo, (ed.), Is God Real? (London: Macmillan, 1993), in which he contends that the main issue between realists and their opponents is not whether there is or isn't a God, nor whether God is a referent to denote a being who exists of himself, nor whether talk of God is to be interpreted in a reductionist manner; the issue is as to what account can be given of what it is for the proposition 'God exists" to be true or false.
[42] I. Ramsay, Models for Divine Activity, [London: SCM, 1973], p58; quoted by Soskice, p146.

claim for 'objectivity' - 'objective reference' - is grounded in the sense I have of being confronted, of being acted upon, in the discernment I have of some claim impinging upon me."[43] This conclusion is inadequate because it cannot describe the nature of that by which one is confronted. Assuming there is 'something out there', the need remains to provide a description of it. "An empiricist theology gives no basis for trans-empirical claims."[44]

However, Soskice contends that a way still can be found to establish an understanding of religious language that makes it possible for a theologically realist approach to religious activity meaningful to be articulated. Establishing the credibility of realist theology as a category for the utilisation of religious language has to be done in a way that distinguishes it from idealism and empiricism. Soskice defends the theist's right to make metaphysical claims, provided the prime concern in making such claims is possibility, not proof. To illustrate this Soskice employs what she terms 'reflective theological realism'[45], with its

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[43] Ramsay, Models, p61, quoted by Soskice, p146.
[44] Soskice, p147.
[45] Soskice, p148. This position, referred to as 'critical realism' comes under attack in M. Durrant's, *Reference and Critical Realism* Modern Theology, 5:2, Jan. 1989, p133-143. In his review of Soskice' book published in The Journal of Religious Studies, Vol. 23, p297-300, Durrant comments, (Critical Realism) "An untenable position, a position she readily admits the critical realist in theology is committed to, namely that God might turn out to be wholly other than we conceive Him to be...such an 'X' would not be God at all." Cf. *Sniping at the Hedgerow,* a review article by G. Jones concerning G. Loughlin, Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology, (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), in Reviews in Religion and Theology, (London: SCM, 1996/4), p11-16. Our consideration of Soskice' viewforces us to conclude, "that a theology of grace is in the end the only satisfactory explanation (or justification) of the revelatory function of theological language." S.Patterson, Scottish Journal of Theology Vol. 46, no.1, p27 A theology of revelation understood in terms of prevenient grace, "the conviction that we are enabled to have access to God solely through God's prior action - the prevenience of God's grace"... "Is God's prevenience defendable in terms of the universality of a religious dimension to human life? a functional equivalent of revelation - Homo Religiosus. Human beings understood as inherently related to God; possessing an ontological root which is irreducibly religious." Thiemann, p3. This Thiemann says is the approach of D.Tracy, in his Blessed Rage for Order, (New York, Seabury Press, 1978), p106, 108-109. Thiemann quotes from Tracy, "We experience a reality simply given, gifted, happened. [That experience further] discloses a reality...which functions s a final, now gracious, now trustworthy, now absurd, always uncontrollable limit of the very meaning of existence itself...The objective referent of all such language and experience is that reality which religious human beings mean when they say God." Thiemann, p4. This is a subsidiary problem. The priority is to establish whether or not any coherent argument can be advanced to establish God's prior reality., otherwise, even a doctrine of revelation will fail us. Thiemann quotes Feuerbach, The Essence of Christianity, (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), "In revelation, man goes out of himself, in order, by a circuitous path, to return to himself! Here we have a striking confirmation of the position that the secret of theology is nothing else than anthropology - the knowledge of God is nothing else than the knowledge of man." R. Thiemann, p5.

emphasis on experience, community, and interpretation. It is within experience that reference is grounded, providing it with a cognitive dimension. Every user of religious language is a member of a 'particular community of interest' providing the context for referential claims. Interpretation is essential because it is not words that refer, but speakers using words that refer; within a community that is itself derived from experience. Users of religious language use a vocabulary which has emerged out of community; a product of the continuous and continuing convictions of its users. Language used in this way might invite the charge of relativism. This does not necessarily deprive it of its referential status. It is possible to talk of core-referential terms, applicable across theories, which might reinforce a realist rather than a relativist position[46] Central to this argument is experience, understood as either dramatic or as diffuse, causing us on reflection to posit metaphysical claims.[47]. The elucidation of such diffuse experiences is via an established way of explanation using a common, descriptive vocabulary. Therefore Soskice seeks to rebut the charge of relativism by denying that reference has to be established in terms of unrevisable description.

> [adopting]...A social theory where reference is established partly by senses of terms, but largely by speakers' use of those terms in particular situations. Experience does remain vital, but it is admitted to be experience as assessed in the categories used by a particular community of interest and within a particular tradition of evaluation.[48]

Soskice illustrates her argument by referring again to the proposition, 'God is Spirit'. It is not necessary to understand that this describes some form of cosmic disclosure capable of being embraced by all at once. Rather it is one of many stumbling approximations used to describe experiences of a similar type, all

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[46] Soskice, p150.
[47] Soskice, p150.
[48] Soskice, p151.

thought to be of God, which over time the community discerned to be the most appropriate. To say 'God is Spirit' is to describe an experience of God within a particular religious tradition. Within any religious tradition, there are its Scriptures. They contain the descriptive vocabulary that is the basis for articulating individual religious experiences. Its foundations are the stories it tells, the recounting of experiences, dramatic and diffuse, brought about by the activity of an otherwise transcendent God. Contemporary religious experiences are interpreted according to the Scriptures; the text itself inviting reinterpretation in the light of such experiences. This is hermeneutics. Soskice's argument is supported in that the seeming lifelessness of the biblical text is due to a preoccupation with historical criticism as the sole context of interpretative activity; equating religious truth and historical fact, at the expense of the significance of experience then and now. However, still the question remains, what of God?

> Religious people speak of God when human knowledge (perhaps simply because they are too lazy to think) has come to an end, or when human resources fail - in fact it is always the 'Deus ex Machina' that they bring on the scene, either for the apparent solution of insoluble problems, or as strength in human failure - always that is to say, exploiting human weakness or human boundaries. Of necessity, that can go on only till people can by their own strength push these boundaries somewhat further out so that God becomes superfluous as a 'Deus ex Machina' [49]

We may reject idealist self-invention of meaning as far as religious language is concerned. We may deny the possibility of establishing, empirically, the validity of truth claims made using religious language. Yet how successful is the claim that the meaningfulness of religious language is established in terms of it having been mediated through the content of experience?.[50]Soskice indicates how we

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[49] E. Bethge (ed.), D.Bonhoeffer: Letters and Papers From Prison: The Enlarged Edition (ET, London: SCM: 1971), p282. See other references at p341 & p361.

[50] "Theological experiences...there seems to be no way of perceiving their referent so as to compare what it is with what is said about it. Anything that appears is less than God...For the sake of truth, theology has to

might articulate the content of a particular type of experience, in so doing hypothesising about its source and inspiration. However it does not establish the existence of its source - God. We still need a description of God that avoids reductionist or relativist categories. With regard to describing God in terms of the appropriating of an experience, Feuerbach's judgement remains valid,

> The belief in revelation exhibits in the clearest manner the characteristic illusion of the religious consciousness. The general premise of this belief is: man can of himself know nothing of God; all his knowledge is merely vain, earthly, human. But God is a superhuman being; God is known only by himself. Thus we know nothing of God beyond what he reveals to us...By means of revelation, therefore, we know God through himself; for revelation is the word of God - God declaring himself. Hence in the belief in revelation man makes himself a negation, he goes out of and above himself; he places revelation in opposition to human knowledge and opinion...But nevertheless the divine revelation is determined by the human nature. God speaks not to brutes or angels but to men; hence he uses human speech and human conceptions...God is indeed free in will; he can reveal himself or not; but he is not free as to the understanding; he cannot reveal to man whatever he will but only what is adapted to man, what is commensurate with his nature such as it actually is; he reveals what he must reveal, if his revelation is to be a revelation for man...Thus between the divine revelation and the so-called human reason or nature, there is no other than an illusory distinction; - the contents of divine revelation are of human origin, for they have proceeded not from God as

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answer for God; the tale 'God is'; and the judgement, 'God is God.'...Might it be the case that the fundamental reality given for faith is not God but a relationship with God. In that relationship, God may not appear unambiguously." P.Sponheim, *Review of R.. Scharlemann, 'The Being of God: Theology and the Experience of Truth, (New York: Seabury, 1981),* Interpretation, Vol. 36/4, p419.

> God, but from God as determined by human reason, human wants, that is, directly from human reason and human wants.[51]

Cupitt's basic question remains unanswered. How is it possible to use human language to establish the meaningfulness/existence of concepts or entities that by definition belong to an extra human realm? Metaphor has an important role within the dynamics of the using of religious language. By applying metaphor we might explain more precisely that which otherwise appears unintelligible. We still need to establish the existence of the 'unintelligible'. Experience, of the diffuse kind, is not able to do that. However, the dramatic kind suggests how it might be possible. Appealing to Scripture within the context of experiences, general and diffuse, does not resonate as perhaps it ought because Scripture is a record of dramatic religious experiences. Diffuse religious experiences may be products of Divinely initiated encounter, but they can only be identified as such from the perspective of what is revealed of God within the context of a dramatic religious experience.[52] By appealing to metaphor we have answered the wrong question.

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[51] L. Feuerbach, The Essence of Christianity, (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), p206-207. Although Feuerbach speaks of revelation in general, what is being criticised here is general revelation as opposed to special revelation. Our argument is that special revelation is a proper category for describing the nature and activity of God, albeit in ways referred to ironically by Feuerbach, as we shall see when considering use of rhetoric and accommodation within the Biblical texts. Special revelation has to be prevenient or else it will succumb to the criticism levelled against revelation in general by Feuerbach. As Torrance points out, "To suggest that God speaks here or there and in this or that way is to adopt criteria. It is to endorse those specific critical controls underlying one's claims that are presumed in one's answer to the question. It is thus not only to make truth claims but to assume or presuppose further, logically prior truth claims. The suggestion that critical criteria are presupposed in such claims, however, is a seductive one. Their logical priority suggests some kind of historical priority - that they come first, that to be pre-suppositions of the recognition of revelation they must necessarily be temporally prior to the revelation event...It might appear that we are simply playing a game of infinite regress...however to assume that there is no resolution while continuing to make theological statements is, as a matter of fact, to assume a resolution, to stop the buck by making a fideistic commitment to some particular set of presuppositions." A. Torrance, *The Self-Communication of God: Where and How does God Speak?*, p1.

[52] See E. Mascall, The Secularisation of Christianity, p104, f/note 2 for a contrary view."Traditional theology, with its insistence that the Gospel is about God implies that 'we have some knowledge of God before the Gospel. It cannot be merely knowledge that he exists, because to know that something exists is not to say anything unless it is known what exists. The Gospel states that it is the holy God in whom we have already believed, whom ignorantly we worshipped, whose true nature is now finally declared in Jesus...And so if we say that Jesus is from God, manifests God or is God we are making a synthetic assertion...If someone holds that we have no knowledge of God apart from Jesus, and also holds that it is revealed that Jesus is like God, then nothing can tell either for or against this alleged revelation except the authority of the revealer. Since the revealer is said to be the very God to whom the proposition first introduces us we run here into a most awkward circularity.'..and we do not solve the difficulty by introducing the word, 'self-authenticating'." Turning this criticism on itself; it is because 'nothing is able to tell for or against this

Cupitt is questioning the validity of religious language, however used, as long as its intention is to validate truth claims concerning the transcendent.[53]

4. A Provisional Response: The Possibility of rehabilitating Realist Theology.

Serious consideration of an anti-realist perspective on language and reality as each operates on the other relationally reveals the basic issue to be a hermeneutic one.[54] This is due to the implicit assumption of the veracity of 'correspondence truth theory' concerning language and reality, truth and reference."That there is a transcendent or extra-linguistic dimension to a life of faith appears so self-evident as to warrant very little, if any reflection."[55] Prioritising language - a 'turn to language',[56] - denies any satisfactory solution to the problem of 'reference', and so, we cannot speak of the 'truth', - the 'referential' nature of religious statements. Alternatively, we might dispense with reference altogether. Fodor introduces Ricoeur as an example of someone seeking to unite these perspectives so as to be able to establish objective extra-linguistic reality outside the rigidity of correspondence truth theory. Ricoeur seeks to preserve word-object relationship within a world-view characterised by the interrelation of signifiers to avoid the conclusion that, "All that remains is an

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alleged revelation', that faith can be invoked as a category of understanding. It is within the context of a faith-experience of the dramatic, pointed type that the word 'self-authenticating' becomes entirely appropriate.

[53]"Centrally important to post-critical philosophy is the notion that human experience is not some 'thing' which the experiencing subject has; rather it is an act/event in which persons participate. Experience is participating and knowledge is the result of persons being in relation to other persons/things...language is a relational/social phenomena. It does not simply describe or define reality. It has many expressive functions which together pattern and shape reality. He [Gill] claims that the metaphorical and the performative - ritualistic or confessional - aspects of religious language always take precedence over describing or informing statements about God or human reality. [according to Campbell] this is mildly problematic to the theologian" C.M. Campbell, *Review of J.H. Gill, 'On Knowing God', (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981),* Interpretation, Vol. 37/2, p219-221. Our task is to demonstrate how the problem alluded to by Campbell can be overcome by embracing positively what he regards as problematic!

[54] J. Fodor, Christian Hermeneutics: Paul Ricoeur and the Refiguring of Theology, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995).

[55] Fodor, Christian Hermeneutics, p2.

[56] R. Rorty, (ed.), The Linguistic Turn, (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1967). It is possible to view such a 'turn' positively, see J. Milbank, *The Linguistic Turn as a Theological Turn,* in The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p84-122.

indefinite play of signifiers within an all encompassing text that has no beginning and no end."[57] It is necessary to acknowledge that, "The relation between language and world is irretrievably hermeneutical in character."[58] Theologically, this is grounded in the notion of faith, which permits reference in the 'absence of truth'.

> Theology (and the Christian life as a whole) is thus better served by exploring the rich internal workings of its own form of life rather than by being preoccupied with how it might engage others who do not share this way of life on some purported neutral territory.[59]

In discussing Ricoeur, Fodor argues that the biblical text is metaphorical, even poetic, but a text of a distinctive kind, and therefore has to be understood within a unique frame of linguistic reference. Revelation - inherent to the biblical text - shatters an everyday sense of descriptiveness while allowing for a sense of belonging far more profound than the "surface movements of our everyday discourse alone"[60] The biblical text is concerned with manifestation rather than verification. The biblical text "manifests an initiative that is not ours in inviting us to a world we did not make."[61] Revelation understood in terms of a dialectic, operates by an unceasing generative power extending through debate, discussion, and interpretation. It requires commitment to the event and to its unceasing movement: revelation in terms of it being hermeneutical, dialogical and conversational; offering itself as a Trinitarian motif.

> Being invited to join a conversation is being invited to participate in a particular way of life, in this case to enter into the very life of God, who

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[57] Fodor, p4.
[58] Fodor, p5.
[59] Fodor, p19, quoting N. Lash, "The theologian's hermeneutic task is one of recasting inherited Christian language into terms at once interpretively faithful and yet accessible to our time." Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God, (London: SCM, 1988), p175.
[60] Fodor, Christian Hermeneutics, p38. This confronts Cupitt's assertion in The Long-Legged Fly, which, in invoking the analogy of the pond-skater denies that there is anything but surface experiences.
[61] R. Williams, *Trinity and Revelation,* Modern Theology, Vol. 2/3, (1986), p197-198, quoted in Fodor. Christian Hermeneutics, p39.

reveals Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Theological appropriation of conversational, hermeneutical models of revelation, therefore requires that they be given a proper Trinitarian display...Indeed, the Christian doctrine of God as Trinity displays the structure of revelation in a way which corresponds to God's own being and invites us to see a correlation between our hermeneutical being-in-the-world and God's revelatory act.[62]

Therefore we have to acknowledge the distinction between knowledge and belief. Realist theology makes no claim to know anything of God 'as He is known to Himself within Himself' unless such knowledge has been revealed by God. The mode of God's revealing may preclude anything being known of Him. Realist theology believes that God is. The argument concerning our inability to transcend the human linguistic-cultural realm does not threaten the viability of such a contention. Rather, it informs as to what may be known of things as they are in themselves. It does not prescribe what may or may not exist, nor does it deny the possibility of relating to it. Revelation, engaging hermeneutically through the language of the biblical text conveys the reality of God in terms of a relationship established in that way. There is revealed to us, God as He is to Himself, in terms of the mutual, reciprocal inter-relatedness of the Divine Being.

> [To affirm that God is love] is further to affirm the radical relationality of God's nature as ultimately mysterious yet person-like. The latter affirmation moreover, both grounds a theological understanding of the economic Trinity in the primary Christian confession of Jesus Christ while also suggesting how the immanent Trinity can be understood in and through the economic Trinity...For the Trinitarian understanding of God is the fullest Christian theological understanding of the radical, relational, loving, kenotic God who revealed God-Self in and through the incarnation.[63]

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[62] Fodor, p39-40.
[63] D. Tracy, On Naming the Present, p34.

Such a relationally based, Trinitarian theology is far removed from the 'real god' which is Cupitt's target, a god derived from,

> caricatures of traditional Christian views of God as a lone being consumed with His own power-interests noted in our discussion of Cupitt and the Sea of Faith Network. Might we wonder whether some of their critiques would have been less strident, less narrow, and more relevant if they had engaged explicitly with the Trinitarian interpretations of God proposed by Moltmann, Pannenberg, Gunton and others? In all probability their tendency to think of an outdated 'God' as the solitary being seldom found in contemporary systematic theology stems from their tendency to subsume Christian theology within philosophy of religion. Our conclusions showed that even an interpretation of human selfhood that underrates the importance of 'relationality' to the other is doomed to fail.[64]

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[64] A. Thiselton, Interpreting God and the Post-modern Self, p158.

CHAPTER 3

In Parallel with Don Cupitt: Proposals for the Sustaining of Realist Theology.

1. Introduction

Cupitt's anti-realist approach to theological language does not necessarily entail the demise of its use. He reconstructs theological language as religious language - religion being understood as a human creation – a linguistic metaphysics.

> Around this metaphor (sign) I tried to build a text that would weave together the Word and the flesh, biological feeling and cultural meaning into a continuous story...A new metaphysics might take the form of a network of such unifying metaphors...I'm after a minimal creed, a postmodernist attempt at reconstruction.[1]

Cupitt does not claim, as some do, that if the concept of a self-existing God is meaningless, the word 'God' is redundant.[2] Cupitt does not accept that denying the existence of God necessarily results in a totally secular society. For him, the religious requirement that emerges from his non-realist reconstruction is as demanding as that of any realist theology.

2. Establishing the meaningfulness of Realist Christian Theology.

Our contention is that the basis of realist Christian theology is the claim that it can sustain itself. The 'demise' of traditional metaphysics may be understood as liberating Christian theology; severing the connection between the God of the

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[1] D. Cupitt, After All, (London: SCM, 1994), p7.

[2] "Today we can no longer even understand Nietzsche's cry, 'God is dead'...The problem is that for us, the word 'God' is dead." Paul Van Buren, quoted but not referenced, in C.Geffre, *Non-Metaphysical Theology,* Concilium, 6/8, June 1972, p91. See his, Secular Meaning of the Gospel, (London: SCM, 1963), The Edges of language, (London: SCM, 1972).

philosophers and the God of Jesus Christ, leaving the theologian free to understand the significance of revelation in asserting its, "...irreducible character attaching to the experience of the living God of faith."[3] For Cupitt, the significance attaching to the person and work of Jesus lies in the realisation that the human ideal need no longer be described in terms external to the human subject. The human subject embodies this ideal within an experience of the actual. This can be described in terms of the 'metaphors' of 'incarnation', 'death and resurrection': representations of what needs to happen within the experience of the human subject rather than descriptions of what actually happened to Jesus. The history of metaphysics can be described as the establishing, crowning and dethroning of the claimed existence of God. The life death and resurrection of Jesus embodies this history. Any theology established other than by metaphysical speculation reminds us that, "It is an empty phrase, (non-metaphysical theology), if it used to mean that we can give up the ontological reference of theological language as language about God."[4]

Therefore, the challenge is to establish a realist theology other than by metaphysical speculation. This may be at the expense of any empirically verifiable objective certainty, the denying of the possibility of knowing a thing as it is in itself. However, "There have been affirmations about reality which are totally meaningful even though they cannot be empirically verified."[5] We have to demonstrate from within our relativist cultural-linguistic world that it is reasonable to contend that the objective referent of realist theological language is a self-existing reality.

No longer is it possible to confuse the elements of theology deriving strictly from God, and those deriving from nature on a purely ontological level. In

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[3] Geffre, p90.
[4] Geffre, p91.
[5] Geffre, p92.

other words, theology is invited to be itself and to say what it has been given to say by revelation.[6]

Therefore, revelation is primary. The content of any alleged revelation cannot be necessarily constrained according to parameters established according to metaphysical speculation.

> A desire to explain revelation by starting from God as the absolute foundation of existence...The identity of God with absolute Being then becomes the ultimate criterion for the validity of language about God...Such a theology is no more than a human creation...The deepest mystery of God derived ultimately from the Logos of human reason...Therefore, any non metaphysical theology must accept 'reduction to mystery', i.e. to think about God only within revelation.[7]

There is no difficulty in accepting a denial of objectivity. If God is understood solely in terms of revelation, then God is subject. There is no knowledge to be had of God as God is to God; neither is there knowledge to be had of God apart from revelation. Cupitt is right when he contends that when we speak of God in objective terms we cease to speak religiously. To attempt to objectify God – to make God real by representing God as an object – is to engage in idolatry.[8] However, this approach could also invite the response that the only meaningful way to talk about God is in terms of non-realist theology. "The God of metaphysics is replaced by the God of the ethical conscience; God understood as the regulating principle of human action."[9] Indeed, It has been argued that the Protestant reformation led inevitably to the internalisation of faith.

> Less evident, but no less important, is the close tie between modern humanistic atheism and its apparent opposite, Reformation theology.

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[6] Geffre, p94-95.
[7] Geffre, p96-97.
[8] J.Calvin, The Institutes of the Christian Religion, (1559), H. Beveridge (trans).(Michigan: Eerdmans, 1989), Bk. 1, Chs 11 &12.
[9] Geffre, p98.

Profoundly distressed by the abstraction and universality of medieval theology and deeply impressed by the concreteness and particularity of nominalist philosophy and theology, Luther started a religious and social revolution by directing his theological attention to the individual believer...Luther constantly sought the certainty afforded by a personal relationship with God mediated by Christ. The conclusion of this quest for salvation is summarised succinctly in the theological doctrine implied by the phrase, 'pro nobis'...For many people who were less dialectical than Luther, however, the notion that Christ is always 'pro nobis' signalled a significant shift towards the centrality of the self. From this point of view, the emphasis on individual salvation suggested that human concerns lie at the centre of the Divine, and therefore the cosmic purpose.[10]

Cupitt has written in similar vein,

> Subjectivity is the only true Divinity, for only as I take religious realities to heart and make them wholly my own do I discover what religious truth is. And the specifically religious requirement is just this demand, that I shall achieve spiritual liberation by wholly internalising religious objects such as God, Christ, the Spirit, and so on. It is only by internalising religious ideals that I can attain them. Although this theme has been expressed with the most outstanding force by Luther, Kierkegaard, and some of their modern followers, it has always been present in the tradition...If theology takes it seriously, then theology must shift from an objective to a subjective and internalised interpretation of Christian doctrines. Then it is that complaints of reductionism and atheism begin to be made.[11]

Theological language has to preserve the referential nature of God's self-existence. God must be able to be described in terms which express this self-existing reality even if such a description is a result of revelation: the

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[10] Mark C. Taylor, Erring, p21.
[11] TLOG, p92.

consequence of having been encountered by a self-revealing God within the immediate linguistic-cultural world.

> We cannot start from an existing idea of God and then see how it is modified by the event of the Incarnation. We can only know the God of Jesus Christ by starting from the particular history of Jesus...If we are faithful to the place which is our starting point in appropriating the truth of revelation[we will see emerge]...the representative schema of an interpersonal 'I-Thou' relation between man and God.[12]

It is not inevitable that religion become internalised - theologically non-realist - it is possible to argue for a theology of reality, grounded in an "understanding of how Jesus Christ is the unity of the reality of God and the reality of the world."[13] This avoids the speculative dualism of a theology derived from the categories of metaphysics while preserving its referential basis in the face of an increasingly secular perspective which any progressive anthropomorphisation of religion is bound to engender.

> The message of radical [non-realist] Christianity is clear and simple - too clear and simple. God is not an all-powerful causal agent, interfering occasionally in the natural order. God is an ideal image of our highest values, constructed by human minds, the projection of our aspirations. This is a conscious revision of the Christian tradition, a new interpretation of Christian language, and why should it not exist?...What radical Christianity lacks, in short, is a sense of the infinity of God, of the utter incommensurability of all human thoughts with the reality which is God. Precisely because of this lack, it has no place for the classical doctrine of revelation, as a disclosure of the eternal in time, to which no words or images could ever be adequate. Revelation does not come as a clear

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[12] Geffre, p100-101.
[13] Geffre, p101.

message from an invisible person. It comes as a transforming insight into the transcendent mystery that is present in and through finite forms.[14]

3.A Deconstructionist Approach: A Model for Establishing Realist Theology?

Here, we take deconstruction to mean the elimination of any objective referent as far as the meaning of any text is concerned. This does not mean that texts are meaningless. Words mean something. Using a word conveys what the word means to the user but anyone using a word must accept that its hearer/reader will not simply receive its meaning as understood by the user. Its hearer/reader understands the word according to what it means to its hearer/reader.

It can be argued that this makes direct communication impossible because each person will use a word according to what he/she understands it to mean. Yet communication goes on. The vast majority of words in common usage mean the same to whoever is the user. This is not necessarily because there is an objective referent to verify meaning. We may consult a dictionary, a book of words about words; this merely emphasises the self referring nature of language. Cultural conventions establish vocabularies of shared meaning. There are also words whose meaning will always be controversial. This does not prevent communication. Rather it invites a different approach to establishing what words mean. This is possible when both user and reader/hearer are able to amplify their understanding of the meaning of the word being used directly to each other. It is more difficult when the user is not available to clarify or explain his/her 'intention' in using particular words. A text may have been produced at another time and/or in another place. Hence the difficulty in interpreting the biblical text. Yet understanding its meaning – interpretation - is a necessary discipline within

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[14] K. Ward, *From face to faith,* The Guardian, October 1993.

Christian Theology. Only extreme fundamentalist - inerrantist[15] - approaches to the biblical text would not so seek to establish its meaning.

It has been argued that to read the biblical text from a deconstructionist perspective renders its interpretation impossible. "The reader encounters ambiguity, equivocation, opposed meanings and cannot decide for or establish one or the other."[16] This conclusion is strange. Just as individuals in dialogue adopt a collaborative approach to discovering what each means when using particular words, so the history of the church is testimony to the way in which people have collaborated in interpreting the biblical text in order to understand its meaning. Individual interpreters may go too far, even deliberately disregarding the 'author's intention'. Deconstruction may deny the possibility of objectively verifiable meaning, but it does invite the active seeking out of meaning. Deconstruction, as 'interpreted' by Cupitt, regards language as outsideless - we cannot transcend the limits of language - there is no guaranteed real meaning. "This way of putting the deconstructionist case means language disappears as a sure vehicle for transmitting objective meaning between persons."[17] Why should this be a threat to realist theology? Is it 'true' that, "the development of deconstructionism has a strong tendency to undermine the doctrine of revelation, with fatal effects elsewhere in our theology?"[18]

> The most serious casualty is an I-Thou relationship between humans and God, by which is meant the idea of a relationship between persons in which each encounters the other as a person and communicates with them as a person. This is in contrast to an I-It relationship where I may indeed encounter another person but do not treat them as such nor communicate with them as such. Deconstructionism tends to destroy an I-Thou relationship with God by

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[15] See, K.C. Boone, The Bible Tells Them So: The Discourse of Protestant Fundamentalism, (London: SCM, 1990].

[16] P.Miscall, The Workings of Old Testament Narrative, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), p2: in M. Ovey, *Deconstruction: Gagging the Christian God?*, Cambridge Papers, vol.12, no.4, Dec. 1993, p2.

[17] Ovey, *Deconstruction,*, p2.

[18] Ovey p3.

> denying communication. If language is not a possible vehicle for God to use in revealing Himself, then the Bible cannot give us direct knowledge of God...If deconstructionism is correct then a certain type of relationship, I-Thou, disappears.[19]

According to Ovey, the following consequences result from the breakdown of this relationship.

- We can have no knowledge of God's will, and as concepts of obedience and disobedience are irrelevant, the whole drama of salvation and its manifestation in a person's life via conviction, repentance, conversion and sanctification becomes devoid of meaning.
- God cannot be understood in relational terms. What then does it mean to say, 'God is love?'
- Assurance becomes vacuous; how can we know anything for certain as far as God is concerned?

In order to defend the I-Thou relationship, Ovey argues that deconstruction asserts that "even God cannot use language to communicate."[20] Even if it were conceded that God might communicate through sacred texts, deconstruction would render such communication meaningless by its insistence that such texts be open to interpretation; that their meaning is always controversial. Ovey draws a distinction between a legitimate polyvalent perspective - a text having many meanings - and an illegitimate omnivalent perspective - a text having any meaning.[21] However, a deconstructionist approach does not necessarily demand that any text be open to an omnivalent approach. Given the way a community collaborates in identifying a settled interpretation of otherwise controversial words, phrases, sentences and texts, it seems fair to argue that the biblical text has only ever been interpreted from a polyvalent perspective. However,

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[19] Ovey, p3.
[20] Ovey, p3
[21] Ovey, p3-4.

God would indeed be a God of inconsistency (since one could respond to a text with two mutually inconsistent reactions about His character: but both would be true). Moreover, this God would be shaped essentially by us and by our reactions, rather than on account of what He discloses Himself to be. Indeed, this is one of the greatest objections to seeing God in 'I-It' terms, that it encourages idolatry.[22]

Ovey presents a very particularist propositional theology. However, in spite of Ovey's criticisms, a deconstructionist approach can admit the possibility of language being a communicative medium and does not necessarily demand that God cannot be said to communicate in a way which is meaningful. We now have to consider how it is possible for God to be a user of language - how He might initiate conversation in order to make Himself known?

4. Realist Theology in terms of Deconstruction? The Biblical Text.

As a medium of communication, the Bible operates at two levels. It describes how, when, and where God communicated directly with human beings within a particular cultural - historical framework, and it provides a methodological framework which allows the reader to appreciate the continuous and continuing nature of the communication God is believed to be having with humankind.

> A 'text' is not to be regarded primarily as a 'historical source' that enables us to add to the store of our knowledge of the past. In the case of the 'historical source', and in the interpretative activity that corresponds to it, the written artefact effaces itself and becomes transparent to a reality which is the real object of investigation. It is this extra-textual reality which is the real object of investigation, and the written artefact is valuable only so far as it permits access to that which is other than itself...On the other

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[22] Ovey, p4.

hand, the term, 'text' implies in current usage that no such easy distinction is possible between reality and the means by which it is mediated. That is not to say that a text is a self-contained world, unrelated to reality outside itself. The point is rather that in its textual embodiment reality is inevitably shaped and reconstructed out of a heterogeneous mass of raw material; it is not simply transcribed or repeated. The access to extra-textual reality offered by the text will therefore be indirect, for it proves impossible to separate the extra-textual content from its textual form; the referent from its verbal representation. A certain opacity and resistance to penetration attend the phenomenon of the text.[23]

Watson invites us to respond positively to the opportunity offered by deconstructionism. By being drawn into the text and having the text make demands upon us we are invited to discover God as the One who emerges out of our struggling with its meaning. Our call to wrestle with it in this way is in order that we appropriate its meaningfulness. In so doing we discover an inherent, extra-textual reality. This does not sound the death-knell of the transcendent God, but locates the place of encounter. Taylor's conclusion that, "The death of the transcendent Father need not be the complete disappearance of God, but can be seen as the birth of the Divine which now is grasped as an immanent and eternal process of dialectical development,"[24] is not inevitable. From the human perspective, the eclipse of the transcendent Father by the horizon of our linguistic limitations need not signal the complete disappearance of God, but is an invitation to recognise God within the unfolding process of human history due to His locating Himself in its midst, accommodating himself to our ability to understand. This is not bound to lead to the dissemination of the Divine,

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[23] F. Watson, Text, Church and World, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), p2. Watson engages with Cupitt when discussing the creation narrative described in Genesis Ch. 1. Watson, Text, Church and World, p139.
[24] M.C. Taylor, Deconstructing Theology, (New York: Crossroad, 1982), p102, in J. Wesley Robbins, *Pragmatism and the Deconstruction of Theology,* Journal of Religious Studies,, Vol. 24, p375.

"Throughout language, located nowhere, available everywhere."[25] Indeed, what would such an approach mean in regard to the language of the Bible?

> From the viewpoint of an ancient Christian tradition, radical [non-realist] Christianity misunderstands the poetry and mystery of Biblical language about God. It moralises, and with supreme irony, anthropomorphises the idea of God, making it a pale reification of human social regulations. It misses the unique form of reality which is God, the One whose name is ineffable, from whom all words fall back, but in whose presence of dark mystery is the fullness of joy, for whom hearts long with unquenchable, if often unrecognisable desire. Aquinas wrote: "revelation...joins us to God as an unknown." Union with that which cannot be said, but which words continually and inadequately seek to point towards, is the goal of the Christian life of prayer. If this is so, perhaps radical [non-realist] Christianity, can for some who have been repelled by false images, open up the way to that God, the God of orthodox theistic faith.[26]

Extra-textual reality is revealed within the immediate cultural, historical reality; communicated by the text. The mediation of this reality is described according to the cultural, historical context out of which the text emerged. There is a significance attaching to the context within which the text is read and interpreted. This is the process by which we are encountered by the extra-textual reality; able to be understood in terms of our own immediate cultural, historical context and appropriated according to the methodological insights discerned when immersing ourselves into the text; emphasising the 'dual-role' of the text - recording actual encounters, and indicating how subsequent encounters should be interpreted.

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[25] Robbins, p377.

[26] K. Ward, *From Face to Faith,* The Guardian, October 1993. Ward, here appeals to the apophatic tradition which, although invoked by Cupitt in support of non-realist theology, is within traditional realist theological considerations.

Cupitt speaks of such a process in terms of an encounter with the 'void', the 'nihil',[27]

> They are the ones who gather to celebrate, and to bear witness to, the Divine power that is conspicuous by its absence in any linguistic or cultural formation. To them has been revealed, through their immersion in language, the bountiful, but restless, sacred void that is the worldly reality underlying human language and culture. It is these literati who in and through writing, are closest to, and thereby in a position to keep the rest of the culture close to, the Divine reality.[28]

Ovey's argument that deconstruction necessarily contradicts the assertion that God can be known because it denies the communicative function of language has been shown to fail. So too the argument that deconstruction necessarily leads to the rejection of the claim that there is an existing God. Texts containing the 'Word of God' may be read differently. This does not mean that they are to be understood differently. The theologian reads the biblical text to discover what it means. However, within the theology of biblical interpretation, deconstructionism does raise the issue of foundationalism - the possibility of identifying of an epistemological basis for theology itself independent of that theology.

> Philosophy has always played an important role in the shaping of theology in the West. In turn, philosophy in the West has always been preoccupied with epistemological questions. That preoccupation may have reached the point of pathology in the modern world; but it was always present in the philosophy of antiquity and the Middle Ages. Thus most systematic theologians in the West have felt it incumbent on themselves to address the question of the epistemological basis of what they say about God.[29]

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[27] Cf. LifeLines, Ch.11, p128-139; & also Creation Out of Nothing, Sect 2, p19-82. See also the challenge to Cupitt in R.Williams, *Religious Realism: On not quite agreeing with Don Cupitt,* Modern Theology, vol.1, no. 1, p3-24.

[28] Robbins, *Pragmatism*, p379. - Robbins is addressing 'theological deconstructionists' generally, not Cupitt in particular, although the general comment does apply to the particular views held by Cupitt.

[29] N. Wolterstorff, Divine Discourse, (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), p36.

This lends weight to Cupitt's argument that philosophical considerations have 'distorted' the theological task. However, the inevitability of non-realist theology remains a non sequitur. Deconstruction provides an opportunity for re-establishing non-foundational theology, based on the meaning of the text.

> His [Thiemann's] claim is that the debate in general and the explanation of the doctrine [revelation] in particular is flawed by what he calls an 'epistemological foundationalism'...Reformation motif of Divine sovereignty and prevenience is his point of departure... He examines in considerable detail the neo-Kantian position of Kaufman. For Kaufman, theology has no access to the Divine identity or to the Divine prevenience and so becomes essentially constructive, a disclosure rooted in human imagining, providing at best doctrinal concepts which humanise and provide an essential orientation to life...Thiemann's own analysis clearly turns on his claim that "the doctrine of revelation I seek to define is not a foundational, epistemological theory but an account which traces the internal logic of a set of Christian convictions concerning God's identity and reality." ...Expression of belief in God's prevenience through the dynamics of the Biblical narrative...narrated promise...[is] not only a persuasive statement of the possibility and necessity of a theology that is determined by the regulatory doctrine of prevenience but also it exposes a modern pre-occupation with revelation as a species of epistemology that arguably covers a theological vacuum.[30]

Such a perspective opens the way for articulating of a realist theology within a post-modern framework. One such approach is Graham Ward's 'theological materialism'.

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[30] R. Hjelm, in a review of R. Thiemann's, *Revelation and Theology,* Interpretation, Vol., 41/2,1987 p193-195. C.f. J.E. Thiel, Nonfoundationalism, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991). Also W.S. Johnson, The Mystery of God, p3-4, for how Barth's appeal to a non-foundationalist basis for the doing of theology resonates with elements of post-modern thinking. As we have already seen, however, revelation can be understood in terms of epistemology if described as such in non-foundationalist, fideistic terms.

...Where does this leave us - or at least me and those like me - who believe that it is important that theology accepts both its anti-foundationalism (a correlative of the freedom, magnitude and alterity of the Divine) and (in order for it to remain theology rather than some subset of anthropology) a realism concomitant with traditional notions of revelation and incarnation? It leaves us with what I suggest might be termed theological materialism. Our webs of words and power relations, the differential grids within which we live and through which the significance of our lives is both given and received, bear witness to our finitude and fallibility (sin, perhaps). The immediacy of things in themselves remains inaccessible. Language does not mediate in the sense of acting as a third order, as a vehicle for the expression of these things. But language is not a totality. It presents the aporias, the effect of an alterity which has preceded and gone on ahead of it. This alterity we can neither capture nor tame. But neither is this an other which is so other that we can know nothing about it. It is an other, a negative plenitude, which makes possible all our mediations and promotes the endlessness of supplementation - as the empty margins enable the text to be positioned. Deconstruction, as Derrida has recently remarked, [Aporias, p15], is an aporetics - an analysis which continually alerts us to that which exceeds our grasp, to that which remains enigmatic, mysterious, outside and yet bordering on what is known...With post-structuralist or deconstructionist thinkers such as Derrida theological and metaphysical horizons are opened up - not, as with empirical representationalism or linguistic idealism, closed down...As a philosopher, Derrida will not name and define the aporia to which he constantly bears witness. But as theologians, it is with this imitation of transcendence that we begin. With enigma and hence awe and wonder, located in the very historical, economic, social and

> physical matrices of our living we are, I suggest, as theologians, being offered a new model for incarnation. [31]

Ideas such as these help sustain arguments in favour of realist theology in the face of its critics, even though they are a positive reaction to philosophical developments regarded by the same critics as necessarily bound to promote non-realist theology.

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[31] G. Ward, *Theological Materialism,* in C. Crowder (ed.), God and Reality: Essays on Christian Non-Realism, (London: Mowbray, 1997), p158-159.

CHAPTER 4

Don Cupitt: Non-Realist Theology, the Bible, and the 19th Century.

1. Introduction.

Having considered Cupitt's non-realist theology within the context of philosophical anti-realism, our contention is that realist theology is not incompatible with the essential issue Cupitt addresses. At the heart of the debate is the interpreting of the biblical text. Is it reasonable to understand it in terms of revelation and as such interpret it from the perspective of realist theology? As part of his television series, 'The Sea of Faith',[1] Cupitt dealt at length with the subject of biblical interpretation. The series as a whole was devoted to considering how the changing ideas that emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries affected how society regarded the Christian faith. Cupitt paid careful attention to the way the biblical text was 'read' during that period. The series yielded up fascinating insights into how Cupitt's journeying towards non-realist theology in particular and philosophical anti-realism in general was fuelled by the ideas generated during this period. However, the wistfulness which Cupitt ascribes to Albert Schweitzer,[2] itself echoing something of the wistfulness Schweitzer himself employed in his conclusions concerning the historical Jesus,[3] appears to surround Cupitt himself as he grapples with the essential lessons to be learned from this period.

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[1] Produced by the BBC in 1984; published in book form in the same year. Subsequent references will be to SOF

[2] SOF, p102-112.

[3] "He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word; 'Follow thou Me!' and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who He is." A. Schweitzer, The Quest of the Historical Jesus, (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1906 - ET. 3rd edition, London: SCM, 1981), p401.

2. According to Cupitt: Science & Religion: a Clash of Methodology?

Cupitt begins by contrasting the attitudes pervading religion and science as the 19th century dawned. Scientific knowledge had shown itself to be man-made, provisional, ever changing and fast growing.

> Scientific knowledge is so different from religious knowledge that it might seem that the two could easily co-exist without coming into conflict.[4]

Conflict however was inevitable. A progressivist science was set to confront obscurantist religion: a deeply moral and spiritual religion was set to regard science's vision of the future as 'unsatisfying, unspiritual and shallow'. Religion's agenda necessitated a cosmological dimension - it had to speak of origin and destiny - beginning and end, 'Alpha and Omega' - but this area was now being claimed by powerful science. In describing the attitude of religion in the 19th century towards the emergence of a scientific way of thinking, Cupitt provides an insight into his own personal self-understanding,

> More generally, religion promotes an accepting and acquiescent temper of mind, whereas science promotes and requires analytical and critical habits of mind. Science teaches one always and systematically to question received theories and try to improve upon them, to seek out difficulties and anomalies, and to pick over the pieces and check them bit by bit. From the point of view of traditional religion, the scientific mind is presumptuous, awkward, troublesome and rebellious.[5]

The importation of scientific methodology into the consideration of religious knowledge claims brought the conflict inside religion, a conflict that raged at two distinct levels; at the straightforward, factual level as between the testimony of

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[4] SOF, p79.
[5] SOF, p79.

the scientist and the record of the biblical author;[6] but also the challenge to the alleged authenticity of the biblical text by the introduction of a scientific methodology into its interpretation. The conflict as to how to interpret the text proved to be the more significant as far as biblical scholarship was concerned.

> For the traditionalists the Bible is a Divine and Holy book, whose author is God Himself. It is His word to men. The only fitting way to read it, and the only way to unlock its secrets, is to read it with traditional receptive devotion. The critical attitude must be unsuitable because it is question begging, assuming in advance that the Bible is not God's word but a merely human book. To this the Biblical critic replies that there are many religions and many sacred books. We cannot just assume dogmatically that one of them is authentic and ignore the others. Holy books must be read critically, to appraise the religious and moral values they teach and the historical information they give. Besides, the Christian Bible is clearly a human, historical document, tied to certain past times and places. If we are to use it as a source of information, we must obviously ask of it the same questions as we would put to other historical documents. Unlike some sacred books, the Bible has a very mixed literary character. Its writings were not Scriptural from the first. They began as occasional writings, which were preserved, won wide esteem, and were eventually made scriptural by the decision of the Church. Thus the conception of the Bible as scriptural is not original, but a secondary, historical development. The Epistle to the Romans is, on the face of it, presented to us as having been written by Paul to some people in Rome. It does not even purport to be addressed timelessly by God to mankind. So the Biblical critic says, my method of reading the Bible is the natural one, not yours.[7]

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[6] See SOF, p64-67 for Cupitt's own assessment of the issues raised.
[7] SOF, p80.

This is how Cupitt imagined the conflict to be: in a hyperbolic way, each position has come to be expressed as a caricature, neither of which is a particularly accurate representation. It represents the extreme views, but does grave disservice to everyday readers of the Bible who, without the encumbrance of either a bigoted fundamentalism or a thoroughgoing scepticism, engage seriously with it. With regard to the traditionalist position, 'Was it ever thus?' Regarding the emerging scientific position, 'Will it ever be?'

3. According to Cupitt: Landmarks in Nineteenth Century Biblical Studies.

Cupitt argues that the first major insight to emerge as a result of importing critical method into biblical studies was the recognition of the category of 'Myth'. Biblical 'truth' and heathen 'fable' were of one and the same 'myth' - "the style of thinking found among all peoples in the earliest stages of their history."[8] This had led Eichhorn to regard any claim that 'God appeared', or that 'God spoke' as evidence of a period in human history when people thought in such terms. This may not be entirely fair, because, "[Eichhorn] extended the principle of accommodation to include the 'oriental mentality' which [he] believed the Biblical writers possessed."[9] Cupitt's conclusion is a long way from this somewhat matter of fact understanding of myth. Cupitt's contention is that,

> The old way of thinking has a kind of ahistorical religious immediacy. People would have defended it by saying that God is unchangeable. The God who spoke to Abraham is identical with the God who speaks to us,

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[8] Attributed by Cupitt to Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, (1752-1827),in his *Urgeschichte,* a work produced in 1779, discussing the existence of creation and flood stories in many literary and religious traditions. Not referenced; SOF, p89. Eichhorn followed J.S. Semler, (1725-1791), regarded as the 'founder' of *Neologism*, which broke from the traditional view of Scripture as a product of direct Divine inspiration, making it possible for the Bible to be considered critically. Semler argued that the text was to be engaged with as it was - written within the perspective of a pre-scientific worldview; in so doing he championed the doctrine of accommodation, which has a central role within the unfolding drama of the hermeneutic exercise. G. Bray. Biblical Interpretation, Past and Present, (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), p244-5, 248, 257-263.

[9] Bray, Biblical Interpretation, p258.

and God uses for our present guidance today the old narrative of His dealings with Abraham. The 4,000 years that have intervened are neither here nor there, for God is not subject to historical change. We do not read the Bible primarily to learn history, but in order to be taught by a God who is not historical but eternal and who always deals people in just the same way. There is no difficulty in supposing that God speaks to me today in and through the way He spoke to Abraham then.[10]

All Cupitt seems intent on dismissing is perfectly sustainable, even after a critical engagement with the text. The rationalist perspective that framed the conclusions of Eichhorn would prove equally susceptible to the scrutiny of critical enquiry. Cupitt may be heard cheering such conclusions to the echo, yet seemingly not realising that they sound the death-knell for his own non-realist dogma. 'Post-modern' is not simply that which is after the 'modern', as far as the history of ideas is concerned. The 'post-modern' has established itself over against the "modern'. Cupitt uses the arguments of the 'modern' to justify claims made in the light of the 'post-modern', notwithstanding that the 'post-modern' has established itself in terms of its rejection of such arguments. The God heard to speak to Abraham, the echo of Whose voice has reverberated down through the ages, is being granted a hearing once again. Rather than silencing every voice save its own, humanity's critical nature is now forced to surrender before the clamour of the competing cries of all who seek to be heard. Earthquake, wind and fire are again confronted by the still, small, voice.[11] Once again, "He who has ears to hear, let Him hear."[12]

However, notwithstanding such criticism, this is the background against which Cupitt engages with the fruits of nineteenth century Biblical studies. Attention is

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[10] SOF, p90.
[11] 1 Kings, Ch 19, verses 1-14.
[12] The refrain often used at the end of a parable told by Jesus. E.g. Matthew 13, 8, & 13, 43.

concentrated on D.F. Strauss, (1808-1874), and his application of the category of 'myth' to the Gospel records. Bray comments,

> A somewhat aberrant form of the Tübingen approach was that of D. Strauss, whose Life of Jesus (1835) maintained that the gospels could only be understood on the basis of myth. Strauss borrowed this concept from the neologists but pursued it more systematically, by extending it to the gospels as a whole and not restricting it to certain phenomena such as parables...Strauss undoubtedly went too far in applying this principle to the texts, but he made the point that it was necessary to find an overall principle which could be used to interpret the meaning of the gospels.[13]

Cupitt notes that Strauss's upbringing caused him to believe that Christianity was founded upon descriptions of supernatural, yet historical facts - unique miraculous events. Later, within the Tübingen school, Strauss came under the influence of Hegelian philosophy.[14] Hegel taught that popular Christianity was a set of symbols - described in terms of supernatural, historical facts - representative of a higher, universal truth. Strauss sets out his views most clearly in his work, The Life of Jesus Critically Examined, first published in 1835[15]. It was written against the background of the two competing theories of biblical interpretation referred to earlier. Traditional dogmatic orthodoxy advocated a supernaturalist explanation for events described in the New Testament. Religious liberals, operating within a rationalist framework, argued that natural explanations were available for all such events that they believed had been misinterpreted as miraculous. Strauss sought to refute both theories by 'playing them off against each other'. He offered in their place a 'comprehensive mythological interpretation' of the Gospels. The basis of his approach was to re-examine the

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[13] Bray, Biblical Interpretation, p358.

[14] The philosophical influences at work in Strauss were not limited to contemporary Hegelianism. It has been shown that behind much of Strauss' theology was the influence of Leibniz, especially as developed by Lessing. See A. Torrance, *The Self-Communication of God: Where and How does God Speak?*, p4.

[15] (Tubingen: 1835-6; ET Marian Evans, 1846.)

alleged historicity of the Gospel narrative, which he regarded as having been naively assumed by each of the protagonists. For Strauss, the key to understanding the Gospel record was the idea that Jesus was 'retrospectively' clothed with supernatural attributes as described in the Old Testament in order to justify His claim to be the Messiah. "The figure of Jesus had been mythicized by the religious imagination of the early Christians in order to express their beliefs about Him."[16]The supernatural is symbolic, not historic, a literary explanation for which can be found within the Old Testament. For Cupitt, however, the book provoked a far more profound challenge, and an enduring one.

> What is the modern theologian to do? People think he is a hypocrite. As Strauss himself puts it, 'the Church receives the evangelical narratives received as history: by the critical theologian they are regarded for the most part as mere myths'. If that is the position, then how can the theologian continue to preach in the Church?...He cannot expect to convert the Church to his point of view, nor himself to the Church's. But nor can he simply leave theology at the very moment when he has discovered the truth and penetrated into the deepest mysteries of the subject: that would be impossible. No, he has no choice but to stay and try as best he can to bridge the gulf between the consciousness of the theologian and the consciousness of the Church. The collision has not arisen merely because of the rash curiosity of one individual; on the contrary, 'it is necessarily introduced by the progress of time and the development of Christian theology; it surprises and masters the individual, without his being able to guard himself against it.' [17]

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[16] SOF, p94.

[17] SOF, p95. Although Strauss and his 19th century contemporaries are often regarded as introducing this conflict, it is worth noting that the questions being addressed were already part of the ongoing history of the Church. See K.Scholder. The Birth of Modern Critical Theology, (1st published, 1966; ET London: SCM, 1990).

Strauss's particular methodology has been subject to sustained criticism, both in respect of pre-critical and post-critical perspectives.[18] In spite of this; as far as Cupitt is concerned, the question that remained unanswered is whether traditional faith can be maintained regardless of the conclusions yielded up by critical enquiry. How could anyone believe that the meaning of God's word could be discerned according to the illuminating of God's Spirit alone? Or is it that just as the Church is called to be at odds with the world, ethically, should it not also be at odds with it intellectually?[19]

Against this background Cupitt introduces the legacy of Albert Schweitzer, (1875-1965). According to Cupitt, Schweitzer was a rationalist, seeing the pursuit of truth as entirely compatible with loyalty to Christ. He is described as metaphysically agnostic, regarding religion as primarily to do with ethics and the will. During theological study, he became 'captured' by the New Testament. His reading of it led him to reach a radical conclusion directly at odds with the emerging liberal Protestantism of his day. He had been as ruthlessly critical of the text as other scholars, yet his conclusions were very different. Schweitzer argued that the whole of Jesus' ministry was dominated by an intense apocalyptic expectancy which 'lived on' after His death. This was in opposition to the prevailing school of thought which taught that the Kingdom of God was destined to emerge from within the existing historical order, brought about by the harmonisation of Christian morality with an inevitable progress in the social condition of humankind; accomplished by the indwelling of the God revealed in

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[18] F. Watson, Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), p38-41.
Watson uses language more often associated with structuralism - criticising Strauss for emphasising 'synchronic autonomy' over 'diachronic development' in order to critically compare Strauss's approach with that of Calvin.

[19] As Torrance points out, the legacy of Strauss means that "the affirmation of the veridical status of 'rational' criteria immanent within the mind can do no other than interpret the history of Jesus, together with all other history, as exemplifying those prior suppositions which are absolute...Strauss' approach exemplifies how critical immanence inevitably leads to the material identification of God's self-communication with the universalisation of our own interpretative criteria and self-understandings." A.Torrance, *The Self-Communication of God*, p5. In a footnote to the above, Torrance makes the point that "It is not surprising that Strauss' *Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet* would so influence Feuerbach in his concern to explore further human consciousness and the psychological mechanisms underlying myth-making." p5, f/n 21.

Christ according to the work of the Holy Spirit. Schweitzer contended that Jesus' vision was of the immanent dawn of a supernatural Kingdom of God, within which He would be revealed as Messiah, the Son of Man.[20] Such a Kingdom was the subject of His proclamation. Its coming was to be preceded by tribulation, and to hasten its dawn Jesus took upon Himself such tribulation. Consequently, the disciples were encouraged to believe that the kingdom would come in the immediate aftermath of Jesus' death, within which they would be reunited with Him. Jesus had been mistaken. The Kingdom did not come. Schweitzer paints a picture of a post-orthodox, post-liberal, tragic Jesus.

> A tragic hero, a figure of extraordinary nobility and moral grandeur inspired by a sense of destiny, who had taught an ethic of brotherly love and had voluntarily taken it upon Himself to endure the tribulations of mankind in the hope of seeing the coming of a new order.[21]

Cupitt describes Schweitzer as 'the first tragic Christian'. There is no good purpose discernibly at work in the world, a world of tragic conflict and suffering. We are left with the Christian 'hero' confronting such a world with a 'will-to-love'; the embracing of a voluntaristic religion. For Cupitt, Schweitzer is heard to echo much of his contemporary, Nietzsche. Cupitt remarks, "the tragic Christian has to be strong."[22] The call is to be loyal to the 'eternal religion of love', to discover a reverence for life.

4. <u>The Door opens upon the 20th Century.</u>

This for Cupitt is the heritage bequeathed by the intellectual turmoil of the 19th century. We now live in a Post-Darwinian universe, structured according to Post-Nietzschean thought and Post-Freudian analysis. This is the context within which

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[20] The apocalyptic figure designated as such in Daniel chapter 7, verses 13-14. A title given to Jesus at various times during His earthly ministry. E.g. Matthew, 10, 23; 16, 27; Mark 8, 38; 14,62; Luke, 9,26.
[21] <u>SOF</u>, p106.
[22] <u>SOF</u>, p107.

the Gospel has to present itself as real. As far as Cupitt is concerned, the Gospel has been wrestled free from its text by the strong hands of the critic. However, critical reason could not and cannot contain or constrain the Gospel. Christ still encounters his enquirers, His interrogators, and His inquisitors and continues to turn questions back towards those who question Him. Out of His history emerges a Christ who demands engagement at the level of faith. The twentieth century has seen biblical studies move away from historical-critical enquiry as it becomes absorbed into the full panoply of the history of ideas. Exegesis is no longer to be sufficient, it requires hermeneutics to make sense to a contemporary reader. How a text might continue to influence successive generations is a different issue from discerning its original meaning. Although hermeneutics had itself emerged as a discrete philosophical discipline during the 19th century;[23] until the turn of the 20th century, it was subordinate to exegesis as far as the biblical text was a concerned. Schweitzer's most profound contribution to the ongoing debate was his realisation that the legacy of a biblical hermeneutic constrained by exegetical methodology was a Christ 'utterly alien to the present day'. The emergence of hermeneutics invites a whole new approach to discerning the religious significance of the biblical text. This provides Cupitt with a springboard into present day controversies surrounding this whole area. Biblical hermeneutics became the unpredictable and uncontrollable work of human creativity by which Christianity is continually transformed. Christianity comes to be seen more and more as the product of the creative human religious imagination, working within a tradition and in dialogue with its own sources, but no longer constrained by the fiction of timeless, unchanging truths vested in some otherwise transcendent authority. It becomes a living, ever-changing and diverse organism.[24],

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[23] For a thoroughgoing discussion concerning the origin and development of hermeneutics, see, W. Jeanrond, Theological Hermeneutics; Development and Significance. (London: SCM, 1994). For a consideration of the place of hermeneutics within the overall perspective of an emerging post modernism, see, A.Thiselton, Interpreting God and the Post-modern Self, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), part 2, p47-80.

[24] SOF, p111.

Exegesis prepared the way for a thoroughgoing hermeneutic engagement with the biblical text. Not that hermeneutics has been absent from the Christian tradition until the modern period, rather, but because of the way exegesis had been done prior to the modern period, it had developed a false picture of what being 'Christian' meant. The modern period with its emphasis on the historical and scientific provided the biblical interpreter with a properly prepared text. In the future, the meaning of the biblical text itself would be established, at the same time as providing a framework within which the significance of the successive stages of Christian history could be discerned and appreciated. This provided the impetus necessary to move beyond the 'modernist' theology of TLOG, even when understood from an anti-realist perspective. Cupitt is now, in his opinion, able to begin describing a post-modern theology.

CHAPTER 5

Don Cupitt: Non-Realist Theology as an Expression of Religious Language.

1.Introduction.

In the preface to Creation Out of Nothing[1], (CON), Cupitt states,

> This book is a philosophy, or an anti-philosophy of religion. Its chief theme is the production of reality by language. Or, alternatively, the conquest of nihilism by speech-acts. Or the creation of all things out of nothing by God's Almighty word...Articulacy is power. Your vocabulary shapes your world for you and enables you to get a grip on it. Conversely, the limits of your language are the limits of your world...the end of the philosopher's

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[1] [London: SCM: 1990]. The book received a 'hostile' reception - "An anti-realism as general as this amounts to solipsism...A solid argument for universal anti-realism is lacking...From the unsurprising thesis that everything within the human universe - which is to say, everything described or experienced by us - is thus experienced or described in human terms, Cupitt deduces the outrageous falsehood that nothing exists but words... Which one of you, when your son requests bread, would give him a piece of paper saying bread. Bread is a word, Bread may be a sign - and it is time that Cupitt ate his words - but no-one lives by words alone...If arguments for a generalised anti-realism were sound, of course we would simply have to put up with all of this; but what arguments are there?...Cupitt's rejection of realism, Platonism and metaphysical theism is claimed to be a modern/post-modern revelation, but it is seemingly based on the verification principle...by adhering to this Cupitt concludes that there is no truth at all outside creative fiction...Cupitt's constant claim that no-one who is anyone can now believe in God, or hear God's voice, or think there is a truth beyond our knowledge or conception is simply maddening..." S.R.L. Clark, Journal of Religious Studies, Vol. 27, p559-561. Clark's use of 'bread' and 'words' is a reference to Matt. 7, 9. The contrast there is between 'bread' and 'stone'. A more accurate parallel is Matt. 4, 3-4. Unfortunately that passage invites a conclusion more agreeable to Cupitt than to Clark;'And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread", but he answered, "it is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'" Anti-realism has no defining characteristics. It is impossible to conceive of creative anti-realism. That is why Clark's conclusion is apposite, "In the last resort it has always been the realists, the true believers, who have seen that tyranny is never cured by calling it something kinder, and have still been able to endure by hanging on to their firm knowledge that there is truth and beauty far beyond the reach of the lords of language; that God, will as a matter of fact, arise." One reviewer was moved to write positively regarding Cupitt's style, if not the content of the book! "A noteworthy feature of all Cupitt's writing is its rhetorical force. He is articulate, movingly poetic in places, sometimes irritating, always interesting and thought provoking. This is not the work of a coolly objective theologian but of a passionate enthusiast, an evangelist for the god we create in poetry. Would that more theologians were half as passionate and interesting! You may think he is a heretic but that is no reason to dismiss him. He may be wrong but he is in ways which force you to record your own position with some care." L. Osborn, Science and Christian Belief, Vol. 4:2, October, 1992, p146-147.

dream, that the human mind could altogether outsoar the limits of language and history and lay hold of absolute speculative knowledge is a great event...And if like religious thought, God's own thought and His word of self-revelation are also just the language in which they are expressed, then we need a philosophy of scripture to explore the relation between the word of God once spoken and the word of God now written.[2]

Cupitt poses a vital question concerning revelation, which is crucial to our understanding of the nature, content, expression, and application of Christian theology Our engagement with Cupitt emerges from the conclusion he draws from this assertion.

> Like us, God is made only of words. So, as we are returned into language and God is returned into language, a new sort of theology and a new doctrine of creation begin to emerge. For we can no longer distinguish clearly between the sense in which God creates, the sense in which language does, and the sense in which we do. The religious life becomes a continuing, flowing creative process, a little like art: humanly constructed and constructing, of course, yet retaining its own special place and authority in our lives.[3]

Cupitt's understanding of creation can equally be applied to theistically grounded activity. We can share the desire to develop an understanding of the biblical text as describing the Christian God in terms of His creative activity. Such a 'philosophy' need not necessarily conclude that God be 'written out of existence.' The biblical text can be read as revealing the nature and purpose of its 'imagined' author. The 'Word of God' suggests we need go no further than language in justifying belief in an existing God. Linguistically grounded 'philosophy' does not necessarily preclude the objective existence of anything words describe.

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[2] CON, p ix-x.
[3] CON, p x.

The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has nothing to do with whether there is a world external to thought, or with the realism/idealism opposition. An earthquake or a falling brick is an event that certainly exists...But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of 'natural phenomena' or 'expressions of the wrath of God' depends upon the structure of the discursive field. What is denied is not that such objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they would constitute themselves as objects outside any condition of emergence.[4]

The biblical text, the 'discursive field' containing a description of creation in terms of the activity of the 'Word of God', invites itself to be read as such. The description, - the creative acts of God mediated through the language of the biblical text, itself a product of continuing creative activity articulated in the words and actions of created beings - does not demand that God cannot exist. The biblical text challenges its reader as to how God is to be understood by providing a way of understanding according to how God is described within it.

2. Cupitt's Understanding of the Doctrine of Creation in terms of Non-Realist Theology.

In his account of creation, Cupitt weaves together two distinct notions. First, he gives an account of reality in the post-modern age: what is real is determined by the language used to express it, emphasising the creative power of the human subject. Second, he gives an account of the creation of a spiritual person: the submerging of the self into the nihil - the void, and its emerging out of it. Only when the self has emerged from the nihil can it appreciate its own creative power, evidenced by expressing oneself in language. Aware of reality as it really

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[4] E. Laclau & C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Social Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics,* quoted by G. Ward in C. Crowder, (ed.), God and Reality, p145-146.

is, one contributes to the ongoing creative process which is the essence of existence.[5] Although non-theistic, Cupitt contends his analysis is Christian. Jesus embraced the nihil and emerged from it, to demonstrate how to live as a creative post-nihilistic person.

> (Or) consider how we might reinterpret Jesus' death for us. Dying, He passed into the void for our sakes. He saw the nihil as He died (Mark 15.34) and His having gone into it then helps me to go into it now. We are all going to have to put our heads into the black sock, you, me, everybody. He had to; but His despair may give us hope, if we can bring ourselves to share it. Dying with Christ is the practice of religion. We go into the nihil with Him.[6]

Creation is an act of human self-expression. Religion, a product of this creative activity, brings order to bear upon the creative power of language. This order is reinforced by use of a particular vocabulary, attributed uniquely to the deity - the object of religion - in terms of ordaining, covenanting, promising etc. The primary focus of creative activity is the structuring of an ordered society, the creating of which is subsequently transferred to a cosmic realm. Particular religious traditions understand creation as bringing order out of chaos; taking for granted, without enquiring into its origins, the pre-existence of formless matter.[7] Within this context, Cupitt's approach is reasonable. Yet what of the origins of pre-existing formless matter? The solution may be found from within the realm of scientific enquiry.

In quantum theory, the nature of time is an even bigger mystery. If it is defined operationally, in terms of other properties of the universe, then it

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[5] For an assessment of Cupitt's understanding of creation see F.Watson, Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological perspective, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), p139-140

[6] CON, p16.

[7] CON, p1-8. See also E. Fox's translation of Genesis 1, 1. "At the beginning of God's creating of the heavens and the earth, when the earth was wild and waste, [*tohu-va-vohu*], darkness over the face of the ocean, breath of God hovering over the face of the waters, God said: Let there be light!" Genesis and Exodus: A New English Rendition with Commentary and Notes (New York: Harper & Row, 1983) p11.

will suffer indirectly from the restrictions imposed upon our knowledge of these properties by quantum uncertainty. Any attempt to produce a quantum description of the universe will have very unusual consequences for our ideas about time. The most unusual being the claim that a quantum cosmology permits us to describe a universe that has been created from nothing.[8]

Therefore, the question is as difficult to answer in terms of cosmology as of realist theology. That is not to say that realist theology has nothing to say. It presents an altogether different perspective - creation out of nothing. For Cupitt, this is an idea incorporated into an existing religious tradition by way of philosophical influences that served to distort and corrupt it.

> The Hebrew Scriptures are not chiefly interested in the question of whether God had originally created the world out of nothing or had addressed Himself to some pre-existent matter. In the inter-testamental writings, at a period when Greek influence had arrived and Greek type questions could be posed, conflicting answers were given.[9]

Was Creation out of Nothing imported into the existing Semitic tradition according to Greek philosophical influence, or did it become explicit in response to such philosophy? To answer this, there is need to appreciate that any theologically realist doctrine of creation emerges out of understanding the nature of God. Cupitt notes that, "Creatio ex Nihilo was clearly a possible development of the Biblical idea that the sovereign God had created all things."[10] If God is sovereign then He must create out of nothing. Otherwise God would be subordinate to that which already existed.

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[8] John D. Barrow, The Origin of the Universe, (London: Weidenfield & Nicholson, 1994), p96.
For a general consideration of the relationship between the alleged existence of God and the nature of time, see, D. Braine, The Reality of Time and the Existence of God, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988).
[9] CON, p6.
[10] CON, p7-8.

> Like all Christian doctrines it (creation) is essentially a statement about God, and in particular about God's relationship with the world. It asserts that this relationship is one of dependence and that every existing thing depends upon God for its existence, whereas God depends upon nothing outside Himself.[11]

A doctrine of creation based on the reality of a self-existing God is a product of revelation. For Cupitt, the attendant synthesis of God's Word creating literally out of nothing denies the possibility of a causal link between making and naming; of the fusing together of the scientific and the theological - creativity and creation. For Cupitt, this can only be made sensible according to the illustrative effect of the life of Jesus. He is portrayed as one to whom power to create is mediated, the transfer of creative power from God to humankind by his being given the right to utter divine speech-acts.

> God as a sort of linguistic idealist is made sensible in that the idea of creating reality by uttering verbal formulae is made more intelligible by humanising it in Jesus and by institutionalising it in the Church.[12]

As far as Cupitt is concerned, instead of seeing in Jesus a move from God to man - the humanising of God – he has been deified. Instead of realising that Jesus reveals the heart of creative activity to be linguistic activity, in Jesus God is seen to reinforce His claim to be almighty by expressing Himself in human form. This is perpetuated by a Church that denies the creative power of human activity by suppressing it by force of Divine edict. Cupitt argues that the starting point for understanding the creative activity of God within pre-Christian religious traditions was the establishing of a social order according to a particular teleological perspective. In time this came to be the way all createdness was appreciated. The establishing of a particular social order - the Church - based on the teaching

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[11] J. Habgood in A. Richardson & J. Bowden, (eds.), A New Dictionary of Christian Theology, (London: SCM: 1983), p129.
[12] CON, p8.

of Jesus became the specific context for describing human creativity. An orderly basis for human creativity is provided by a religious dimension. It is not enough to supply a teleological framework within which to sustain the creativity of human linguistic activity; there must also be the means by which the self is confronted with itself as creature and creator. Religion provides the medium through which the self passes in order to arrive at the realisation that creature is creator. Emerging from such journeying, the self becomes aware of its creaturely destiny, to serve what exists by making it real. Reality emerges out of a relating with and to what exists. Creativity is the process by which reality evolves in which one shares as creature and creator as part of an evolving reality. One embraces creation while realising that creation embraces the self within itself. One acquires a sense of the communal; an appreciation of the ethical and an awareness of the religious.

However, it is as reasonable to describe Jesus as an incarnation of the Divine, a revelation of God, embodying the Divine will and purpose: God using speech to directly communicate to humankind through the man Jesus. Human creativity can be appreciated as having been brought into being by the creative activity of God. The Spirit of God encounters the self in order that within the context of the Divine-human relationship, the will and purpose of God is fulfilled. Creativity is affirmed in community; its fullest expression in terms of mutual inter-relatedness. It need not be that creature and creator be one. Religious language need not confront the self with the self-alone. It is the medium in and through which God confronts the self as it is - selfishly self-existent - with what it can be - selflessly sustained in relationship with God; an encounter expressed through the Word of God embodied in Jesus. Cupitt's account of journeying through the void can be regarded as describing a conversion experience.[13] Rather than having to travel

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[13] The description Cupitt provides has direct parallels with Biblical accounts, e.g. John 3, 1-15, & Romans 6, 1-11.

through the void unaided[14], it could be that the human condition is directly related to having travelled in the opposite direction, leading to an appreciation of self as brute creature. Embracing the nihil may not be the positive experience Cupitt claims it to be.

The biblical text describes the creative acts of God and delineates the way in which God's creative activity is to be understood. It locates the centre of Divine creativity in Jesus. Humankind is brought into the realm of Divine creativity by the Holy Spirit. How is its language to be understood? What does its words mean? How should the text be read? The human subject is crucial. To challenge Cupitt's argument, it is necessary to consider how he describes the way a human being becomes what he or she is able to be.

3. <u>According to Cupitt: The Creation of the Human Subject within Non-Realist Theology.</u>

The first stage in the process is what Cupitt calls the "normalisation of nihilism;"[15] Reality is not determined externally. There is no external standard to appeal to in determining right or wrong, true or false, good or bad.

> We do not have and we could not have access to any extra-linguistic and extra-human meanings and truths.[16]

The self becomes 'intellectually and morally self-critical - wholly responsible.' For sense to be made of existence it has to generate within itself a world of signs - language.

> Experience minus language is a preconscious inhuman nothing, pure chaos...sensation has to be processed or formed by language in order to become intelligible experience...So quite straightforwardly and indeed

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[14] Cupitt's 'description' of getting through the void is set out in <u>CON</u>, p16-18.
[15] <u>CON</u>, p19.
[16] <u>CON</u>, p20.

tautologously, there is and can be no sense in the dream of getting outside the realm within which alone there is sense, namely the world of signs or language, and laying hold of the thing in itself. The thing in itself is the void, the nihil, the absolutely other, the ineffable.[17]

However, Cupitt cannot dispense with "it' altogether,

If there were anything purely given to us it would have to be called primal chaos, or absolute nothingness. Think of it as white noise, or as a formless flux of minute events; what would be left of the world of physics if all the theory were removed? To make the flux habitable we must make it into a world. We have to generate order, meanings, truths, values, narratives. This we do by cleaving the primal chaos, establishing customary or regular distinctions between different zones and kinds, to which socially agreed meaning-values are annexed. so we make the flux into a habitable world of signs, a cosmos. So there is a world - only it is not the world -it is our world, a cultural product. Chaos plus regular habits equals cosmos, the world of signs...This cosmos, our world, is the life-world and our only home. Ordinary human beings live lives that are firmly centred in it, and rightly regard any concern with its supposed outside as being, precisely, 'fringe'...There are many conflicting versions and perspectives within this world of ours, but our world as a whole has no outside as language has no outside, and no foundation or basis as language has none. Indeed our world is able to be a rich and meaningful world of signs only because it is shifting, unanchored and fluid. Sanity is to live firmly centred in a world that has no centre any longer, but has become solidly grounded in groundlessness. At the end of the 2nd millennium the life-world has just recently become profoundly post-ontological, post-metaphysical, and even post-historical. We have entered

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[17] CON, p21.

upon something new and extraordinary that we must learn to live with: the normalisation of nihilism.[18]

To assume the role of the human subject – a creaturely creator - there is a need to dispense with any sense of beyondness. The need is to live with what is within. A preoccupation with what 'is beyond' is an obsession with the boundaries that frame ideas that emerge from within rather than a 'real' or 'sensible' exploration of ideas themselves. However the argument is not about describing established boundaries, but whether or not boundaries can exist. Such preoccupation reflects the ongoing debate between scepticism and dogmatism. Dogmatism for Cupitt, is realistic - seeking the knowledge of the objective realness of things themselves. This, says Cupitt 'decays' into scepticism, nominalism giving way to empiricism. Science was born of scepticism. Affirming the objective realness of things argues that sense experience together with a priori rules or laws generates infallible knowledge, a world of fact. Cupitt; argues that any such realist methodology is essentially flawed because it is based on the assumption that there are facts to be established. However, this does not necessarily demand non-realist theology because it is not necessarily reliant on establishable facts.[19] Cupitt's challenge is to understand creation as an 'open' system - able to determine its own structure - the basis of which is nihilism. [20] He questions the methodology applied to the establishing of a 'world of fact', be it theology or science. How can we know that our senses can be trusted? How can any proposition be regarded as self-evident? Why is it that there is always a 'reasonable' counter-argument to every proposition? To prove a proposition demands an ability to prove the premises that underlie it; does not this invite infinite regression? How reliable is memory? The cumulative effect of this is that

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[18] CON, p21-22.

[19] Hence, our advocating a fideistic epistemology which although is non-rationalist, is not necessarily unreasonable.

[20] Gerard Loughlin refers to Cupitt as a representative of 'nihilist post-modern theology as opposed to 'orthodox post-modern theology' in his Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology, (Cambridge: CUP, 1996).

everything is open to be doubt. The world of ideas has invariiariably responded with a new dogmatism: identifying immediate and infallible intuitions of reason or sense, propositions whose truth is accepted dogmatically: the recovering of 'most-basic' beliefs - groundless themselves - which ground everything else. Such dogmatism is extra-cultural and unchanging: reinforced in itself by being described as revelation. It demonstrates the rationality of necessary truth and of moral fittingness. At its heart is intuitive knowledge of the self represented to the self as self-consciousness.[21]

Cupitt identifies a similar process within the cultural realm. He begins with the classical distinction between matter and form. How do we interpret what is, and so interpret its significance in the midst of all else that is? Whence comes the form into which matter is shaped? Initially, forms were understood to be external to that which is: each form being the objectified and timeless meaning of a general word in contemporary Attic Greek.[22] The contribution of Aristotelian thought resulted in a real cosmos in every part fully formed. This demanded an objectively correct means of classification; philosophical monotheism.[23] Plato's forms became ideas in the Divine mind; the visible world an Aristotelian cosmos created ex nihilo by God as the embodiment of His ideas. The God emerging out of the philosophical world of classical antiquity,

> is a Platonist who has made an Aristotelian world, and it gives rational creatures a basis for arguing back from the creation to the creator. The programme is God's plan: I see the world as ordered because I recognise God's design embodied in it.[24]

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[21] What Cupitt here ascribes to the 'world of ideas' is a non-foundationalist, irrational, fideistic epistemology. His pre-supposed non-realist theology demands he present it in terms of subjectivist self-reflection. This is not unreasonable; however neither is the view that it can be described in terms of a realist theology.

[22] CON, p27.

[23] CON, p25.

[24] CON, p27.

The world exists as an expression of the Divine mind, only for as long as he wills it so to do.

The onset of science encouraged the analysis of data derived from sense experience according to the process of reasoning. Reasoning utilises self-evident truths; logical, mathematical and metaphysical. These truths subsist in the Divine mind, yet are directly accessible by humans because humans are created in the Divine image. To use reason was to participate in Divine activity. The modern period was characterised by the application of transcendent 'a priori concepts', necessary preconditions for a body of knowledge. No longer necessarily located in the mind of God, but understood in terms of being necessary, universal and implicit, thereby guaranteeing the objectivity of knowledge. Yet according to the challenge to traditional views of historicism,[25]

> The system of thought, the set of deep assumptions typical of a particular cultural epoch, may well appear to be a priori to the people of that epoch. To them it is all self-evident common sense. But it may not look so obvious to other people at other times.[26]

Any thought world is entirely contingent. Every system of ideas and values builds into itself its own 'verification principle'. Every world is a 'real' world, the structuralist legacy.[27] Although contingent, it cannot be avoided. Post-structuralism stresses the essential open-endedness, the 'fertile metaphoricity' of language; a dynamic cocktail of 'ferment and flux'. Fact and interpretation, truth and fiction collapse into each other. The nihilism of post-modern reality shows

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[25] "Any belief in the necessity of historical processes, or belief that such processes are immune to human choice and agency."... "More loosely , historicism may refer to other positions. One is the general view that historical periods must be understood 'in their own terms' , as opposed to the terms of the present." Blackburn, Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, p174. Cupitt is employing the latter view here to criticise the former!

[26] CON, p30.

[25] A term which can be applied to a variety of positions. Their common feature is "the belief that phenomena of human life are not intelligible except through their interrelations." Blackburn, Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, p365.

itself to be, "a magical illusion that continually shifts, changes and renews itself"[28]. Society needs to create a world through language.

Therefore, according to Cupitt, whether intellectually or culturally, any attempt to describe objective reality fails. Its legacy is uncompromising fundamentalism. We are confronted by the void of nihilism, offering an opportunity for the self to re-evaluate self-understanding, the creating of the human subject. Cupitt identifies six distinct, characteristic descriptions of the human subject.[29] There is therefore no one thing which defines 'the human condition.' There is no such thing as extrahistorical, unchanging human nature. Nihilism confronts fundamentalism. The human subject denies the right of anything to be of itself an object.

> Diversification, fragmentation, dissolution. The growth in our ability to comprehend all previous styles is paralleled by a matching decline in our ability to make and be convinced by anything coherent of our own.[30]

For Cupitt, this is religion. The religious dimension allows the void to be invaded and conquered. 'Death is swallowed up in victory.'[31].

4. According to Cupitt: The Creative Power of the Human Subject within Non-Realist Theology.

Essential to being human is the pursuit of truth. Yet, 'what is truth?'[32] Cupitt identifies five ways of using the notion of 'being true'. A priori truths; statements

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[28] CON p31.

[29] 'Spirits trapped in the wrong world.' Ancient world-pessimism, often replicated in more austere manifestations of Christian orthodoxy.'Creatures in a cosmos.' Protestant common-sense realism born out of Christian Aristotelianism. A world-affirming religious cosmology. Spectators of a machine'. The product of Cartesian mind-body dualism, bringing with it the possibility of proclaimimg a complete knowledge and the mastery of nature. Agents in the void.' Humean scepticism; all one knows is a flux of present experience. The world is our interpretation. The forerunner of Darwinism, anticipatory of Nietzschean philosophy. 'Spoken by language.' The pre-existent world of language games. Every human act has significance. The code precedes both message and messenger. It anticipates every message that is sent; the legacy of structuralism. 'Beings whose history is over.' Linguistic consumerism; post-modernism; the market place of ceaseless innovation; the flux of fashion; the dreams of desire. CON p38.

[30] CON p40.

[31] 1 Corinthians 15, 54.

[32]John, 18, 37-38. In considering the way J.L. Austin discusses this exchange in his essay, *Truth.* Fodor remarks, "Austin fails to notice one indispensable aspect of truth, namely its intrinsic connection with

of fact; literal truths; narrative truth; value judgements. However, truth yields to pragmatism in the way that dogmatism yields to nihilism. Alongside truth, contends Cupitt, human beings crave a sense of order. The history of philosophy reveals a continuous grappling with how to move from subjectivity to objectivity, from private to public. The creative human subject, Cupitt argues, should grapple with how to move from the public to the private, the objective to the subjective. The so-called real world was understood as comprising matter in motion, possessed of primary qualities hidden behind a veil of sense. Science may have usurped theology, but in its place is metaphysical materialism with its attendant dogmatic atheism. Cupitt advocates distinguishing science from metaphysics by advocating a philosophy of science which denies that scientific knowledge is dependent upon metaphysical truth. This entails a prioritising of the social - of language and culture - a social a priori with transcendental significance; it being presupposed as the condition for human existence. This describes how the human subject can exercise creative power: nihilism shaped according to a socio-cultural linguistic perspective, describing the expressive creativity of the human subject according to a constantly evolving vocabulary. Realism is redundant: be it eternal reality, from which we copy knowledge of it - a correspondence view as to how reality prescribes knowledge; or transcendental realism - knowledge prescribing reality in terms of the application of necessarily true propositions to the raw data of sense experience. Realism retreats in the face of the realisation that nothing is necessary. All language is contingent. Necessity is at best a convention. There is nothing to indicate that language is an isomorphism of reality.

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truthfulness and integrity...Pilate is all too modern in outlook; namely, he believes that questions about truth can be answered apart from questions of truthfulness and integrity. This, of course will not do - either in general or in an encounter with Jesus and those who claim to be His disciples." J. Fodor, Christian Hermeneutics, p33.

> The world is an argument that never gets settled. So there is no objectively determinate real world that could ever be finally fixed in language.[33]

The world is wholly contingent; constructed upon the twin pillars of nihilism and pragmatism; designed according to societal, cultural and linguistic parameters. All existence is perceived through different eyes. This, can have disturbing consequences. For instance, Cupitt announces the 'end of the problem of evil'.[34] This is how Cupitt resolves Kant's dilemma, - asserting the primacy of the moral agent while unable to give up an Augustinian perspective on the origin and nature of evil. Against Cupitt, it can be argued that the contingent nature of creation does not necessarily demand that there is no creator, nor does it demand jettisoning belief in a creator. In the face of such contingency, many find strength from believing in a creator God. Indeed a realist understanding of the nature and purpose of God might allow faith to operate positively in such circumstances; helping to write a moral story.[35] Cupitt argues that even though such matters indicate the potential difficulty any human subject has in expressing his/her creativity, this is the 'reality' of the world. It is contingent, and finite. Realist theistic philosophy served to unify and absolutise the multitude of human angles from which the world can be viewed. God was the ground of finite perspectives. Finite subjectivity within transcendent objectivity. If we dispense with any notion of necessary conditions, the world becomes a constantly changing cultural construction, "suspended within the evolving human argument."[36]

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[33] CON, p60.

[34]"My religious friends, priest and theologians, nowadays actually prefer to accept like anyone else the unmotivated and arbitrary malignancy of life...There is a certain decency about statistical misfortune, meaninglessness and the pathos of transience. We are all of us nihilists nowadays - at least when we are thinking clearly. Even those who claim to be theological realists turn out in the event to regard their own faith as something that helps them to survive and surmount evil, rather than something that helps them to explain it. The problem of evil has come to an end because we no longer think we have a right to expect the way things go, to be by itself and apart from our efforts, a moral story. But I can still think of faith as binding me to do my bit to try to make the way things go into a moral story." CON, p67.

[35] See the comparison between A. Freeman's God in Us, (London: SCM, 1993), and R.Harries', The Real God, (London: Mowbray, 1994), in the Expository Times, Vol. 106/7, April 1995, p193-196.

[36] CON, p68.

5. <u>According to Cupitt: The Creative Power of the Word of God in Non-Realist Theology.</u>

Cupitt asserts that, "Twentieth century thought about language has made God - the old realistically understood God - terminally silent."[37] God was primarily a language user, the ground of the world order, scientific and moral; the One who called all things into existence. Subsequently, human history proceeded through periods of Divine speech, Divine writing, and Divine silence. The Christian tradition is a product of Divine writing, a Scriptural religion. Cupitt argues that scriptural religion blurs the distinction between speech and writing to conceal the fact that God is no longer heard to speak. The text records an authentic voice, endlessly replayable, always immediate.

> It can guide us today just as reliably as the voice ringing in their heads guided our forefathers...There is a pre-established harmony between the structure of language and the structure of reality, and language can be (the Divine language of Scripture actually is) unchanging and unchangingly matched to the unchanging objective natures of things that it reports, so that there can be an unchanging, omniscient and infallibly veracious language user whose word is forever truth and whose purposes are unchangingly expressed in the unchanging word that he has spoken and which is now written down - this text being, in effect his very own voice.[38]

Scripture records the guiding presence of an infallible Divine voice. The language of God is unchanging. It is able to guide through the finite, unchanging set of possible situations which confront human beings, themselves finite and unchanging as far as God is concerned. The text shapes our minds. We are part

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[37] <u>CON</u>, p70.
[38] <u>CON</u>, p72.

of "a stable, literate, sacred civilisation whose guardian class are the scribes and the exegetes, the masters of sacred letters."[39] Cupitt argues that this basis for understanding collapsed under the weight of the critical, linguistic philosophy of the nineteenth century,

> God falls instantly and utterly silent as we realise that the whole scriptural epoch was merely was a diversion or a postponement - now in brackets, now over.[40]

We now live in a time of Divine absence, an assertion justified by Cupitt as follows,

> We have no non-linguistically shaped experience, and if you are no longer hearing from God, that is, if no 'true' language is getting though to you, then He is not being experienced at all. And if there cannot be an extra-human language user, if there is no way in which we who are the only language users might so use language as to transcend the human realm entirely...then the world of language has no outside. Nothing wholly extra-human can get through to us in it, and we cannot use it to transcend itself so as to make contact with something extra-human.[41]

However, it might be argued that the Bible reveals God in historical events. Yet any historical event must be able to be described in order for its significance to be communicated. Description and communication are activities of language. This leads Cupitt on to his most fundamental point.

> All those descriptive sentences in the Bible which identify the saving acts of God and His work in Christ have got to be human sentences, couched in a changing human vocabulary and subject to endless paraphrases, re-interpretations and the like. In no way can they both be human-in-a-human-language and also emanate from an extra-human speaker who

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[39] CON, p72.
[40] CON, p72.
[41] CON, p72-73.

> uses them in such a way as to express a supra historical, fixed and unchanging truth.[42]

The immediacy within the Bible is not that of a speaking God recorded in writing, but the setting down of a writer's perceptions at the time of writing. The Bible is invested with a sense of unchangeableness, rather than admitting the possibility that the writing itself demands to be changed. The reader should have the right to read what is written through his/her own eyes, rather than according to an extra-textual pattern imposed in order to reveal an absolutist authorial intention shaped according to the dynamic immediacy of a Divine voice. The text betrays the transitory nature of any such authorial intention, demanding that the desire of the reader to make sense of what is written for him or herself, be accommodated. In response to Cupitt, we may say that this sense of 'unchangeableness' may be due to a failure to operate within proper hermeneutic considerations. Within such considerations the dynamic of reading for which Cupitt pleads will become a reality. Yet it will not necessarily yield up the conclusion he advocates because God need not, necessarily, disappear from the page. God might well be an active character in the narrative, heard to speak and there to be read about.

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[42] CON, p73.

Chapter 6

Don Cupitt: Telling the Story of Non-Realist Theology.

1. Introduction.

The distinction Cupitt draws between speaking and writing[1] is developed in What is a Story?[2], (WS). For him it is analogous to that between history and philosophy; time and eternity.

> Story bound you into the human world of temporal succession and change, whereas philosophy aimed higher, rising above time and story in order to represent genuine knowledge as consisting in the timeless contemplation of the unchangingly and objectively real.[3]

For Cupitt, realist theology is inextricably bound up with philosophy.

> Story is therefore much more powerfully able to be the actform of life, and to produce life, than is philosophy. If religion is to shape human life, then it has obviously got to take anthropomorphic story form...the price is heavy, for this line of thought obviously requires us to abandon the old philosophical and religious dreams of the absolute, timeless and story transcending knowledge. That is not easy. It is what has been called the death of God.[4]...In recent years there has been a good deal of interest in narrative theology and in a literary approach to the Bible. I am warmly in favour of this development. But its advocates so far have been distinctly

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[1] CON p 70 - 76. "The key to the whole Bible is its nostalgia for speech and its odd, paradoxical attempt to blur the distinction between speech and writing." F/note 16, p 70, written up on p206.

[2] (London: SCM, 1991). "We are our stories plain and simple. So we arrive at fictional theology. No master narrative into which religion fits us, just the playfulness of the signs we exchange with one another...Cupitt's book is a foil for telling his own story; from orthodoxy through liberalism to radicalism [theological non-realism]. The world is full of other stories too, though it is a pause for 'Jackanory thought' that not many care to refute Cupitt head on." A. Race, *in Review,* Theology, Vol. 95, p379-380.

[3] WS, pxii.

[4] WS, pxii-xiii.

> coy about spelling out its full implications. Perhaps this shows prudence on their part. I wish I were prudent too, but I'm not. So here is an account of the world-view we may be led to if our philosophical and religious thinking are to become thoroughly post-metaphysical and literary.[5]

Cupitt does not elaborate on what he understands by 'narrative theology', but the opinion of G. Stroup is worth noting for our overall discussion, that

> Many people have found the category of narrative a suggestive and potentially useful device for addressing perennial theological problems; unfortunately there is nothing close to a consensus on precisely what the term means.[6]...Because the use of narrative theology is a relatively recent development, most theologians have reserved judgement as to whether 'narrative theology' is only yet another in a series of fads...or whether the category has real significance for the interpretation and reconstruction of Christian doctrine. By no means is it the case that everyone agrees that 'narrative' or 'story' should become a major motif in systematic theology.[7]

Despite these reservations, 'narrative' is a useful medium for describing God's prevenience within non-foundational theology. However, although useful, it is problematic.

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[5] WS, pxiii

[6] G.W. Stroup, The promise of Narrative Theology, (London: SCM, 1994), p71. More recently, Narrative Theology, has 'refined' itself in terms of 'Narrative Criticism' - described in terms of a "[Jakobson's] communication model of sender-message-receiver, it translates into gospel criticism as author-text-reader. One immediate problem is that we know nothing of the 'real' author or reader(s) of these texts. Narrative criticism takes us into the narrative of the text, including both the story itself and what it reveals of the 'implied' author, narrator and reader. We need to look at how the narrative functions by considering its main features, such as the characters and characterisation, plot and events, story and discourse, conflict and tension, the different settings (spatial, dramatic, temporal and social), the use of time (and the contrasts between reading time, narrative time and story time), rhetoric and specific literary devices (symbolism, irony, patterns, etc.) and so on". R.A. Burridge, *Who is Jesus Christ for us Today? Biblical Criticism and Christology.* Society for the Study of Theology, Oxford, 1994, p7-8.

[7] Stroup, Promise of Narrative Theology, p84. See R. Thiemann, Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise, (New York: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985); and F. Watson, Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997); pt.1, *Studies in Theological Hermeneutics.*

> The quest must therefore be for non-foundationalist foundations: to find the moments of truth in both of the contentions, namely that particularity and universality each have their place in a reasoned approach to truth.[8]

Cupitt's comment concerning the 'full implications' of narrative theology might mean that the biblical text cannot but yield up a non-realist theology: however, in continuing to argue that realist theology is bound to philosophy he fails to realise that his contention vis-à-vis the relationship between philosophy and theology has been accepted. Despite a loosening of theology from philosophy, realist theology continues to contend for the existence of God. Christianity may be described in 'anthropomorphic story form' in order to survive the eventual dismantling of its philosophical scaffolding, yet a realist theology can be constructed upon philosophical non-foundationalism.

2. According to Cupitt: 'The Telling of the Story' - 'The Error of Writing'.

According to Cupitt, within an oral culture, knowledge, language, action, and time are bound into each other. When writing invades, this web of relationships disentangles because when what is said is written down it takes on a timeless/ahistorical perspective. Writing claims a privileged position within intellectual development, becoming universally significant. "In its permanence and universality, the written sign is the forerunner of the Platonic form and concept."[9] With ideas frozen in writing, philosophy assumes its basic form,

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[8] C. Gunton, The One, The Three and The Many: God, Creation, and the Culture of Modernity, (Cambridge, CUP, 1993), p134. "The confusion of foundation with foundationalism may be at the root of the finally unsatisfactory appeal in much recent theology to narrative. For example in Ronald Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise, 1985*. The problem with all such appeals is that they either succumb to some form of subjectivism ('I have my story, you have yours') or they introduce in 'narrativity' an implicit and not always acknowledged form of foundationalism. Here again universality will out." Gunton, The One, The Three, The Many, p135, f/n6. Whilst appreciating Gunton's challenge, we will argue that the structure of the biblical text yields up a universality sufficient to be a foundation upon which a reasonable and justifiable theological realism can be constructed. However, that 'foundation' is revelation understood in terms of prevenient grace, and must be thought of as anti-foundationalist in terms of the usual intellectual/philosophical understanding of the term.

[9] WS, p3.

'tenseless and staticized'. Parmenides used literary structure to formulate a "Metaphysics of the Absolute, an ideal of knowledge that is antinarrative, timeless, universal and divorced from action."[10] Parmenides is an example of the use of a particular style of writing as a means of expressing arguments. Writing down an argument was intended to confer a particular status upon the argument.

> Parmenides' fatal presumption, that writing makes a simultaneous and non-narrative vision of truth possible is illusory...He creates the impression of having conjured up something absolute and eternal.[11]

That writing enshrined the timeless, universal and absolute was accepted from the outset. This, argues Cupitt, was an error because a piece of writing is a text, a text is a story, a story cannot be taken out of its time. Therefore, speaking and writing are in reality one and the same thing, the reciting of story. Writing has been misappropriated as a vehicle for preserving timeless truth. Theology allowed the status of timeless truth to be conferred upon its written texts. Yet we may say that while this may be so, it need not necessarily be so. Neither need it be necessary that the claim 'God is' is a result of such philosophical engagement. The claim 'God is' can survive the assertion that theological writing is understandable only in terms of story because the God who 'is' is revealed in story.

Cupitt then draws out a further difference between philosophical writing and the using of writing to tell stories.

> Platonism also ran into paradoxes on its chosen home ground. Philosophy seemed to pretend to be able to transcend the world of language, time and narrative. Yet the philosophers themselves composed sentences; how else could they communicate to us their dream of timeless and sentence-transcending rational intuition? Thus their message was contradicted by the medium, namely language, in which they had to express it. The only

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[10] WS, p3.
[11] WS, p4.

way to hide the contradiction was to make the medium transparent to the point of invisibility so that no-one would notice it. it was therefore claimed that philosophy doesn't use rhetoric but only pure argument, and that it does not fiction or entertain, but puts everything in the very plainest and clearest prose. Philosophy assures us that it never cheats; its language is so clear, non-rhetorical and non-narrative that we can take it on trust...argument itself [is] a form of rhetoric.[12]

We must agree this is true for propositional theology, which understands Christian faith in terms of assent to established propositions. However when theology is understood dispositionally, the story which theology tells recovers a legitimacy which comes from it being understood from a rhetorical perspective. Theology has to persuade as to the veracity of its claims, acknowledging that such persuasion cannot be accomplished by appealing to self-evident truth, or objective verification. The assertion 'God is' is not a casualty of such a realignment, because 'God is' can be understood within a dispositional context. The basis for appropriating such an understanding is itself dispositional, described in terms of the relationship God is said to establish between Himself and those with whom He seeks to relate. A self-existing God is found in the story unfolding around the belief that God 'is'. However Cupitt contends that the following description has accompanied the understanding of 'God is' within the telling of the Christian story.

> What is - the esti - that 'which is entire, immovable and without end; it is now all at once, continuous and imperishable. The esti, posited is always there. There is no void; it fills all things, indivisible and motionless, like a perfect sphere. It is one.' [13]

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[12] WS p7.
[13] G.S. Kirk & J. E. Raven, The Pre-Socratic Philosophers, (Cambridge: CUP, 1960), p263ff. Quoted in WS, p3

Therefore, we suggest that the Christian story requires itself to be liberated from such an understanding so that the 'God who is' can 'be God' within the story.

3. <u>According to Cupitt: The Role of the Religious Story.</u>

Stories affect stories. Lives affect lives. Cupitt wants readers to understand how a religious story affects those encountered by it. Does a religious story fulfil its role more effectively when divested of the 'God who is'?

> Religion, after telling us a story, says: 'Go and do thou likewise'. Its teachings are to be acted upon, turned into conduct. And in particular there is a very long tradition...of urging believers to imitate Christ.[14]

As Cupitt points out, crude literal imitation was not what was called for![15] A religious story can only shape individual life stories in the most general of ways. It cannot relieve individuals of the responsibility for writing their own stories. Cupitt is objecting to the way realist theology asserts authority over its adherents, claiming such authority to be legitimised by the authoritative nature of the god who allegedly sits atop and bestrides the world.

Cupitt is content for individuals' stories to be interwoven with that of the human Jesus, whom he perceives as a useful role model for any life story. However Cupitt fails to consider Jesus' own story as bound into that of 'the Father.' A prior Christological shift has occurred, severing the ontological connection between God and Jesus. This provided for the development of his non-realist theology by contending that the decisive contribution of the human Jesus was to internalise the demands made upon the human subject by an objectively existing God. However, such Christology is not the necessary outcome of the reading of the biblical text. Although sharing Cupitt's Christological sympathies, John Hick comments,

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[14] <u>WS,</u> p12.
[15] <u>WS</u> ,p12.

In the New Testament, the key image [of God] is Father so that this and its correlative image of a Son have become central to Christian discourse. In their original scriptural use these are -in terms of our modern distinction - manifestly metaphors. Literally a father is a male parent. God however is Spirit beyond the biological distinction between male and female and does not literally beget children....When we speak of God as our heavenly father we are using a powerful metaphor which pictures the Divine attitude as importantly like that of an ideal parent.[16]

Cupitt and Hick agree that the relationship existing between Jesus and God described in terms of the Son and the Father is either metaphysical or metaphorical. They each reject the metaphysical as an alien, philosophical invasion contaminating an otherwise pure theological understanding; viewing the relationship as straightforwardly metaphorical. However, rather than being a matter of either/or,can it not be both/and?

If there is an 'interweaving of history and fiction' in historiographical emplotment and explanation, one might ask at what point fictivity begins to undermine historical narration rather than to enable it[17]

Watson suggests the key is 'metaphorical reference'; stories understood as illustrations of reality - a reality so profound as to be incapable of being referred to directly. Stories which convey the reality of a *tremendum fascinosum*,

> a revelatory event which founds the community's consciousness of its identity. This event too will be a historically-particular 'limit-experience' the truth of which cannot adequately be disclosed by normal procedures of historical verification.[18]

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[16] J. Hick, The Metaphor of God Incarnate, (London: SCM, 1993) p42. Within the Pauline literature, Hick notes that passages such as Romans 1, 3-4 & 1 Corinthians 15, 23-28 suggest that the Son was subordinate to the Father, while passages such as Philippians 2, 5-11, Galatians 4, 4, and Romans 8, 3 suggest that Paul understood Jesus as a pre-existent being sent by God into the world, although not necessarily co-equal with God. See J. Dunn, Christology in the Making, (London: SCM, 1980) for a consideration of the particular issues.

[17] Watson, Text and Truth, p60.

[18] Watson, Text and Truth, p63.

Within the Christian story, there is no more *tremendum fascinosum* than the incarnation of the pre-existent Son of the Father. It is not surprising that metaphysical language and metaphorical language fall over themselves in elucidating its meaning. Each is not necessarily mutually exclusive; they can be held together by the doctrine of accommodation. Relationality is the key heart to understanding God, humankind, and the ideal/actual, potential/realised nature of the Divine/human encounter. The Incarnation, within an understanding of God as Trinity is an altogether more 'friendly' way of describing God than the crude monotheism Cupitt describes when confronting realist theology. The Christian story may lapse into such 'crudity' occasionally; Cupitt is right to challenge it, but not right when he asserts that non-realist theology is the only credible way to read the Christian story. The story of Jesus can be 'read' as a revelation of the 'God who is'. The 'God who is' is a God with whom each might relate, our stories bind themselves to God as we are bound to Jesus, because he reveals the Christ of God. Notwithstanding this, Cupitt then asks, What is the function of a 'religious' story?

> A good religious story may persuade me that it is possible for me so to live that I can make my life make sense. And religion itself is the attempt so to live as to make life make sense whatever happens...In spite of everything we can make a meaningful life out of the struggle against meaninglessness. And that's the only answer there will ever be to the so-called problem of evil. Religious rituals and stories help us so to live that we find psychic fulfilment in creative and expressive action. That is the conquest of evil and despair.[19]

Cupitt presses the analogy of story in order to establish that religion can only be properly understood as non-realist, theologically, by invoking a standard criticism from deconstructive literary theory; the denial of a master or metanarrative. The

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[19] WS, p15.

structure of a text cannot prescribe the response of its reader. No author is sufficiently privileged to be able to prescribe the way any individual story might be understood. The biblical text presents itself as a master narrative in both ways. It purports to be a unity in spite of the disparate nature of its individual sections by virtue of its being a consistent description of the way God acts in the world. It describes how the individual life stories of individual human beings must conform in order to be part of the ongoing interaction between God and the world.

> The Holy Scriptures still provide the strongest of all forms of the idea of a master narrative. Not a story we made up but the story that makes us up, conscripting us into its plot; writing God into every step of our lives and every step of our lives into the plan of God.[20]

4. <u>According to Cupitt: The Bible</u>: <u>Telling the Whole Story.</u>

According to Cupitt, master narrative tells the 'world story'[21]. It is a story composed by the world's author. The book which contains it is 'world-shaped', paralleling a world, whose whole course from beginning to end is 'book-shaped'. Text and cosmos have their beginning, their turning point in the middle, and an end. What is at stake is not, 'who is right', but, 'is this the right way?' Will 'another way' yield up a different conclusion? Even though 'another way' may be identified, the same conclusion emerges, because that is how it is. The God who 'spoke' and so made the world is the God whose 'speech' is recorded in the Bible. World and Book present the same message, tell the same story. The book describes how life is to be lived, - we do things 'by the book'. Each individual life is rooted in the centre of all things.

> Your life story, the narrative in the book, the world-story and God's eternal will are lined up and locked together in concentric circles. When

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[20] <u>WS</u>, p87.
[21] <u>WS</u>, p86.

everything is in accord like that, everything is concentred, and you live in the truth.[22]

The Master narrative is not a pattern to be copied, but a drama played out on the stage of history. Each life-story is its own role; albeit faithful to the script. Such a master narrative reassures, offering guidance. What is unknown to those yet to turn the page is known to the author who has already closed the cover. God's plan is ontologised. Text becomes reality. We live out what is there to read out. We act out what is written. Although we might agree with much of this, Cupitt's focus is on the way the master narrative comes to be discerned, and subsequently imposed. According to Cupitt, Christianity has established itself in terms of a master narrative through which it exercises authority, control and influence. The deconstructive literary critic contends that no text can retain its narrative to itself; no author can dictate how a text should be read simply on account of what is written. Any reader of a text responds according to how they interpret its meaning. The text comes alive in the life of the reader. Every reader is different; the text takes on a different life each time it is read. No text can contain its reader. Texts are written to be read in order that readers respond. Here Cupitt directs us to the heart of the contemporary hermeneutic debate. The meaning of any text is discerned by having regard to,

i) The author's intention;

ii) The meaning of the words used;

iii) the structure of the text;

iv) The response of the actual reader;

Traditionally, the meaning of a text is equated with the meaning its author intended to convey. However, what of texts where the author is not available to clarify otherwise controversial interpretations of their meaning? This is exacerbated in the case of a text written hundreds of years prior to being read. A

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[22] WS, p87.

text might be structured so as to demand a response from its reader, suggesting that its meaning depend on its reader. The tension between 'authorial intention' and 'reader response' has to be balanced sensitively and used creatively.[23]

Similarly with the lives of individuals, no structure can constrain individuals according to a predetermined plan without the exercise of coercive power by those who built the structure. Cupitt suggests that the biblical text and the Church conspire together, weaving themselves into a master narrative pertaining to the life of every human being. This is 'sacralised' or 'sanctified' by invoking Divine authorship of the text, and Divine origin of the structure; a structure whose origins are described in the biblical text.

> There is an acute paradox lurking here. In order to set up the idea of a master narrative in the first place, I need a very clear-cut line between language and reality, words and things; but as we explore how the idea of a master narrative works out in practice, the line is being transgressed and eventually disappears altogether. We begin with the kind of ultra-realism typical of most religious orthodoxy, but we seem to end in idealism, or even expressivism. Language in the form of the Biblical text is taking over reality completely.[24]

Cupitt argues that in any realist philosophy, words are secondary to things. Truth is identified according to the 'Correspondence theory of truth'. The 'coherence theory of truth' gives priority to words. Words generate meaning, making things real. Reality is determined according to how coherent are the words used to express it. Cupitt assumes that a master narrative is constructed in terms of

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[23] Each of these positions is 'limiting'. Within such limits hermeneutics is practised. No reader can fail to respond when reading a text, neither can that reader ignore everything of the author's intention when reading it. There is a parallel here with the philosophical 'limiting positions' of ultra-realism and anti-realism. For the purpose of the present discussion this general description is sufficient. We will return to consider in detail the nature and role of reader-response criticism within contemporary biblical hermeneutics in chapter 9, as part of a wider discussion considering the way such an approach might be incorporated within the realist epistemology – established in terms of the category of revelation – which serves as the basis for our engagement with Cupitt.

[24] WS, p88.

'correspondence theory'. We argue for a master narrative discernible according to 'coherence theory'. This can be so for the Christian story because at its heart is Incarnation. To argue that Christian theology imposes a master narrative in terms of a 'correspondence' with an external reality presupposed in terms of realist ontology is to abstract Incarnation, defining it in terms of Logocentrism.[25] Christian theology takes Logos and makes it coherent by describing it in terms of Incarnation. "The Word became flesh."[26] We are encountered in anticipation of eschatological fulfilment, when it will become known that,

> All things were created in Him, the things in the heavens, and the things on the earth; the visible and the invisible, whether thrones, or lordships, or rulers, or authorities, all things have been created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things and all things consist in Him.[27]

Taylor concedes that,

> Historical narrative strives to uncover the coherence of time as a whole...Within the Christian tradition, this view of history can best be described as Logocentric. Christ is the Logos who forms the centre through which beginning and end join to form a unified totality. The implicit unity of apparently disparate events is made explicit through typological and tropological interpretation...These closely related interpretative strategies are actually efforts to master temporality by comprehending human activity as a meaningful historical totality. But this undertaking fails...[28]

This view is based on a distorted understanding of Incarnation, which when understood in terms of biblical exposition provides what Taylor denies is

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[25] Using the analogy of the book, "Books, it seems, are supposed to be 'solidly constructed, unified, and with an intellectual space defined by clear and resolute boundaries.' - Hegel - So conceived, the book, [though not the text] 'is the encyclopaedic protection of theology and of Logocentrism against the disruption of writing, against its aphoristic energy....' – Nietzsche" Mark C. Taylor, Erring, A Post-modern A/theology, (Chicago: Uni. of Chicago Press, 1984), p91.

[26] John, 1, 14.

[27] Colossians, 1, 16-17.

[28] Taylor, Erring, p14.

possible; a master narrative in terms of its cohering with the experience of every one encountered by it. This provides for historical totality, continuity and coherence. This is described by the biblical text; it describes the actual, historical context within which Incarnation is to be appropriated.

Cupitt comments regarding the biblical text.

> In order to say that this book is not a merely humanly invented thing but is the very book of books, we must say that it was written by God, that it has been revealed to us by God, and that it is a perfect fulfilment of God's plan to make known to us His creative and saving purpose. What is in the book is not just any old story, but the one and only objective and story-transcending Truth about God's eternal decree and about our origins, our religious history and our destiny.[29]

Varying the content of this paragraph presents a radically different perception of the same thing.

> 'In order to say that this book is not merely a humanly invented thing but is the very book of books, we must say (that it was written by God), that it has been revealed to us by God, and that it is a perfect fulfilment of God's plan to make known to us His creative and saving purpose. What is in the book is not just any old story, but the one (and only objective and story-transcending Truth about God's eternal decree and) about our origins, our religious history and our destiny.'

Deleting the phrases in parentheses creates the different perspective. The phrase, 'that it was written by God', is at the heart of the discussion. Cupitt's view is based on an understanding of the biblical text as being infallible on account of its 'alleged' Divine authorship, equivalent to the doctrine of 'verbal inspiration'. Such a doctrine has from time to time pervaded Christian thought,

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[29] WS, p88.

> Over against the infallibility of the Pope on the other side of the ecclesial divide, we find the infallibility of the Scriptures. The material, i.e. the theological centre of Christian praxis was once more reduced to a formal principle, which provided the illusion of security at the cost of trivialising and desiccating the Christian praxis.[30]

Cupitt continues,

> So to set up the book's authority in the first place I need a strongly realistic theology, both of the God (independent of the book) who is the book's author, and of the cosmic drama (also independent of the book) to which the book bears true witness.[31]

Here we can delete the phrases Cupitt has included in parentheses, thereby anticipating his question, how?, and asking the question, why? He goes on,

> The book has got to be, in the strongest sense true to the mind of its author and true to the cosmic drama that he has set up. For the book thus to get God and his world exactly right, language has got to be completely masterable and God has got to be its master, so that in this text He really has put down what He intended to say to us. And language has also got to be capable of representing events exactly or perfectly, so that the book can be for us humans a true report and an infallible guide to life. If the book is to be one hundred per cent reliable then it must describe the past and future saving acts of God in history exactly. Language must then be both completely masterable and capable of being completely accurate.[32]

For Cupitt, 'completely accurate' equates to 'literally true'. The words are an exact match to the thoughts of God and the events in the world. However, he

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[30] W. Jeanrond, Theological Hermeneutics, (London: Macmillan, 1991; [p/back ed. SCM, 1994)]), p172 (p/b). Such a doctrine was never intended to represent the emerging Protestant perspective on the place of Scripture in theology. "While attempting to safeguard the authority of the Bible, these theologians betrayed one of the essential aspects of the Protestant Reformation, namely the freedom of every Christian critically to study the biblical texts." p36.

[31] WS, p88.

[32] WS, p88,

previously remarked that the biblical text is a perfect fulfilment of God's plan to make known His creative and saving purpose regarding our origins, our religious history, and our destiny. Those who have been encountered in terms of what the biblical text contains may have provided descriptions of the God so revealed, or detailed explanations of what God's creative and saving purpose might entail. Such descriptions are afforded a status equivalent to its essential content. If we accept that the master narrative of the biblical text is of the kind indicated, its authority is not derived independently of it, but as a consequence of having been encountered by it. If we accept such a view of the nature of a master narrative; that its authority is derived from within itself, then language does not need to point in two directions at once. The thoughts of God and His activity in the world are expressed in a co-incident fashion. The phrase, " the Word became flesh,"[33] captures the essence of the argument. The story of Jesus in encountering the stories of so many, reveals God and makes known His creative and saving purpose. It provides a hermeneutic key able to unlock the mystery of what it is to 'know God'. We are not subservient to the text, making ourselves correspond to what it says. We find that what it means coheres with what we have discovered to be meaningful for ourselves. The biblical text yields up a master narrative, discerned as such by being encountered by it. We do not correspond to it, we become part of it. It reveals itself to be consistently coherent, on its own terms, as far as everyone who is encountered by it are concerned.

> The fundamental unity of the sacredness of the Bible emerges not as a credal proposition or a scientific certainty but as the transforming of the reader through encountering the text.[34]

5. Contra Cupitt: Can the Bible Tell the Whole Story?

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[33] John, 1, 14.
[34] A. Milavec, Interpretation, Vol. 44/3, p318, reviewing G. Josipovici, The Book of God: A Response to the Bible, (London & New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

We now turn to Cupitt's claim that a master narrative can never be discerned because of the way the role of language is to be understood.

> People who want a master narrative want there to be language that is, impossibly, free from the inescapable limitations of all language...They want there to be a story that is not just a story but is the Story, a story that is so much more than a story that it prescribes and replicates the exact shape of reality itself.[35]

This is not necessarily the aim of the biblical text. If it were, we would have to concede that its language does face two ways at once; transcending reality, yet at one with it. The language of the biblical text does not require its meaning to transcend reality. Its language is located in the reality of what is; yet its reality is derived from the meaning of the language employed. The biblical text is never entirely prescriptive. The challenge of faith is to live within the provisionality that the biblical text expounds by responding to the One revealed in it.[36] Speculative philosophy finds provisionality hard to live with. Consequently, it seeks to 'firm it up' prescriptively speaking. Cupitt exposes the futility of such an approach, but this need not necessarily be at the expense of the master narrative. Now we confront Cupitt's argument concerning the revelation of God which the biblical text is said to contain.

> Consider the claim that language is completely masterable, and God is so completely its master that he makes the written text a perennially perfect expression of His mind towards us. But if God's self-expression is indeed thus complete and final, then nothing of God can remain unexpressed and

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[35] WS, p89.

[36] However, in understanding revelation in terms of a 'dialectic of presence', whilst language cannot face two ways at once, the God who is so revealed can be thought of as both immanent and transcendent. The accommodative nature of the revelation, and the language used to describe it enables the actual nature of God to be described in language contained entirely within the creaturely realm.

> he vanishes into His text. It is all that there is of Him, for we have no way of saying that He is anything more than this. He has said it all.[37]

Cupitt observes that for a book to reveal God's mind, a distinction must be drawn between primary mental/spiritual states and their secondary expression in words. Cupitt argues that if the biblical text is to be understood as a master narrative having as its author the One described as being at its centre, this cannot be so. The distinction cannot hold because a master narrative replicates in words the thoughts of its author. Text and author become one. This assumes that there is nothing of God not revealed in the master narrative. Yet we have already argued the biblical text is only provisional as far as its readers are concerned. Similarly, as far as its author is concerned, what is revealed is partial. God does not disappear into the biblical text. He may inhabit the text, but is never equivalent to it. Cupitt argues that God does disappear into the biblical text, that the biblical text merely prescribes and replicates a believer's experience. Ultra-realism becomes textualism. This may reflect the popularity of literalism with its doctrines of infallibility and inerrancy, but is not necessarily so. Fundamentalist ultra-realists have much in common with anti-realist textualists. There is one difference. The 'strong' realist retains a belief in the existence of a God who is, "Actively fulfilling His word. That is, realists always have some form of belief in Grace."[38] What Cupitt calls, 'metaphysical optimists'. The anti-realists, [here Cupitt refers to 'non-realists], have no such belief in Grace. There is nothing beyond the text For Cupitt, the claim that the biblical text is supernatural can only mean a claim to embrace all that was, is, and ever will be within its language. Such language is definitive in all matters of knowledge and action; its replicative and prescriptive style indicating its authority over all that would seek to adhere to its demands.

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[37] WS, p90.
[38] WS p92.

We contend that the biblical text contains a master narrative, discernible as partial and provisional rather than prescriptive and replicative. The biblical text contains a master narrative, yielded up via an encounter with it, rather than being presupposed before engaging with it.

Later Cupitt suggests another way in which issue might be taken with him, the way the Biblical text represents the person of Jesus; the role He plays in the story.[39] It is akin to the controversy between 'High Christology' and 'Low Christology', between 'Christology from above' and 'Christology from below'[40], the 'Jesus of history/Christ of faith' debate.[41] Cupitt argues that biblical fundamentalism uses the accounts of Jesus' life provided in the gospels to "express archetypal patterns and period values."[42] He has had conferred upon Him a deification, in order that words of Jesus be afforded the privilege of being the Words of God. What better way to establish the privileged status of a text than to transpose it into the Word of God? What better way than to embody such words in 'The Word made flesh', the Incarnate Word, God made human? This merely dehumanises Jesus rendering Him ahistorical, due to,

> [the] positivist theory of exegesis, reconstructing the original meaning of the text(we need instead) to accept what the history of Bible interpretation shows - namely, that exegesis always was and unavoidably is a kind of cursive embroidery, a fictional amplification which can easily transform the original text.[43]

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[39] WS, p96-108.

[40] Ways of describing particular methodological approaches to Christology. That from above begins with the Divine nature; that from below, the human nature. According to G. Bray, Biblical Interpretation, Past and Present, (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), p357f, this distinction was first introduced by F.C. Baur at Tubingen in the 19th century. This is only a methodological distinction. Christology from below does not necessarily preclude the possibility of Christ possessing the Divine nature.

[41] The description given to the various approaches to understanding the significance of the human Jesus. The 20th century has yielded up a 'new quest for the historical Jesus' and even a '3rd quest', centred on B. F. Meyer. Bray, Biblical Interpretation, p471-472. There is also W. Hamilton's, A Quest for the Post-Historical Jesus, (London: SCM, 1993).

[42] WS, p103.

[43] WS, p103.

Cupitt's description of exegesis describes it as a human activity yielding up a human perspective. However, the biblical text can be understood as yielding up a master narrative - partial and provisional - via an encounter with Jesus the Christ, the hermeneutic key by which to understand our stories as bound into His story, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father And from His fullness have we all received, grace upon Grace."[44]

[44] John, 1, 14-16, (paraphrase).

Chapter 7

Discovering the Meaning of the Text: the Challenge of Hermeneutics.

1. Introduction

Cupitt's theology is non-realist. His concern is to establish, for religion's sake, the necessity of abandoning belief in a self-existing God. At the heart of our engagement with Cupitt is the biblical text. Our contention is that the biblical text can be read in terms of revelation. It describes God's encountering the world and the consequences; indicating how God continues to encounter the contemporary world and the consequences. Cupitt's 'questions' are not bound necessarily to be 'answered' in terms of non-realist theology. The challenge therefore is to establish a basis for reading the biblical text in terms of revelation.

2. A Basis for Biblical Hermeneutics.

Interpreting a text involves considering available methodologies. There is general hermeneutics, which elucidates the meaningfulness of all there is, and special hermeneutics, which is applied in a particular way according to what is being investigated. There is a parallel here with general and special revelation. The analysis developed concerning an appropriate hermeneutical strategy for interpreting the biblical text is entirely consistent with our description of the way revelation is to understood. More than that, the same epistemological 'foundation' – a non-rational fideism yielding up theological realism is consistent with each description. This is so because of the relationship that exists between revelation and text which in turn informs the relationship between God and the world. As our argument proceeds we will see that the insights of reader-response

criticism will allow us to identify the relationship which operates between text and reader. It is the dialectic nature of these relationships which provides the impetus for continuing to assert that basic to the discussion is belief in God, a realist theology. The reasonableness of such a belief emerges out of a reader's engagement with the text, which informs the reader concerning the special revelatory content of the text, which in turn informs the reader concerning God's general engagement with the world. Hence our preferred understanding of revelation as 'dialectic presence'

There is also the need to consider the distinction made regarding the object of any hermeneutic exercise,

> Philosophers investigate how we can understand any aspect of reality. They are engaged in what I call 'macro-hermeneutics', i.e. the interpretation of the universe. One could say that their 'text' is the universe and its history, while the other hermeneutically oriented disciplines are usually more concerned with what I call 'micro-hermeneutics', i.e. the interpretations of individual expressions of a linguistic or artistic nature.[1]

While this distinction between 'macro' and 'micro' is useful, within theology it is not easily established. We might speak of 'theological hermeneutics' as a 'macro-hermeneutic' exercise, purporting to provide an explanation for all that there is - 'the universe and its history'. There might also be 'hermeneutic theology', a micro-hermeneutic exercise which recognises that,

> Theology is by its nature a hermeneutic exercise since it deals with a tradition mediated in no small measure by written texts and their interpretation.[2]

Any consideration of hermeneutics needs to consider this dichotomy: reconciling the methodological tension existing between 'special' and 'general' hermeneutics; and resolving what is the object of the exercise, 'macro' or 'micro'. A micro-

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[1] W. Jeanrond, Theological Hermeneutics - Development & Significance (London: SCM, 1994), p4.
[2] Jeanrond, Theological Hermeneutics, p9.

hermeneutic enquiry into the biblical text may yield up a macro-hermeneutic perspective regarding all that is; conducted in terms of a 'special' hermeneutic methodology, offering up a methodology applicable to hermeneutics in general.

> It is from the word of man in the Bible that we must learn what has to be learned concerning the word of man in general. This is not generally recognised; it is more usual blindly to apply to the Bible false ideas taken from another source concerning the significance and function of the human word. [The principles of exposition that Barth discusses are, he believes, valid for all texts. He asserts], because they are valid for Biblical exposition they are valid for the exposition of every human word, and can therefore lay claim to universal recognition.[3]

While it might be possible to engage the biblical text via general hermeneutics, in doing so the biblical text takes over,

> At first glance, then, theological hermeneutics will appear as a mere *application of* this general theory. However, Ricoeur wants to argue that 'a more complex relationship' emerges, one that may be expressed in terms of a 'mutual inclusion'. Ricoeur contends that there is only one route: from a general (philosophical) hermeneutics to a regional (Biblical or theological) hermeneutics. However, if the specificity of the Bible is to show itself, it must be followed through to the end. In so far as general hermeneutics has been formulated in a way that is indifferent to a particular text, it is, so to speak, taken by surprise when it encounters the full meaning of Biblical discourse. The result is a reversal in the relationship, an inverse filiation between general and Biblical hermeneutics. The relation between the two thus seems to be inverted,

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[3] K. Barth, C/D, 1/2, p466. See T.E. Prevence, *The Sovereign Subject matter: Hermeneutics in the Church Dogmatics,* in D.K. Mckim (ed.), A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics: Major Trends in Biblical Interpretation, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1986), p240-262.

> philosophical hermeneutics becoming the organon (i.e. a logically demonstrative system of rules) of theological hermeneutics.[4]

We envisage a 'hermeneutic theology' emerging from a 'micro-hermeneutic' enquiry into the biblical text; yielding up a 'theological hermeneutics', a 'macro - hermeneutic' dimension. The theologian harnesses this tension in order to reveal the content of theological understanding. The 'macro-hermeneutic' picture is derived from a 'micro-hermeneutic' enquiry rather than constraining a 'micro-hermeneutic' enquiry by imposing a predetermined extra-textual 'macro-hermeneutic' context. This is analogous to the distinction between narrative and metanarrative. No potential narrative interpretation can be excluded a priori on account of a presupposed metanarrative. The biblical text can be read as yielding up a metanarrative, a macro-hermeneutic understanding, described in terms of realist theology. The biblical text can be understood in terms of God revealing Himself in language capable of being understood by any reader.

Our consideration of Cupitt's argument regarding the biblical text led to the rejection of his view that human history is characterised by three successive epochs; 'Divine speaking', 'Divine writing' and 'Divine silence'. 'Divine speaking' need not be 'silenced' by 'Divine writing', it can continue concurrent with it. Far from collapsing into 'Divine silence' it can continue beyond the closing of the canon – the culmination of 'Divine writing'.

> Biblical hermeneutics receives an important warning from philosophical hermeneutics: it must not be too quick to construct a theology of the Word that does not include from the outset and as its very principle, the passage from speech to writing. This warning is by no means irrelevant, so great is the tendency for theology to raise the Word above Writing...The very originality of the [Christ] event requires that it be transmitted by means of

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[4] J. Fodor, Christian Hermeneutics: Paul Ricoeur and the Refiguring of Theology, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), p240-241.

an interpretation of pre-existing significations already inscribed - available within the cultural community.[5]

The closing of the 'canon' did not herald 'Divine silence'; within the biblical text we read of God's intention to continue to 'speak', and how to interpret such 'Divine speaking'. 'Divine writing' is crucial to the assertion that God speaks. It records God's speaking prior to the time of writing and it describes how to discern God speaking subsequent to the time of writing. These two dimensions focus upon the purpose for 'Divine speaking', and provide the key for understanding the role of the reader. That is to interpret the biblical text in terms of its original composition. Therefore it must be consistently meaningful to any reader. Anyone ought to be able to understand the claim that 'God speaks'. We can demonstrate this by considering the biblical text in terms of its structure as well as its content.

Cupitt contends that philosophical arguments are structured in transcendent fashion, to persuade any reader. All arguments are rhetorical, intending to persuade: a persuasiveness encountered not through active engagement, more via passive reception. The argument is therefore expressed ahistorically because its 'truth' is intended to be understood ahistorically.

The biblical text is indeed rhetorical, but also historical.[6] Every reader must actively engage with it and be actively engaged by it. The story that is the biblical text continues to unfold. All encountered by it become characters in its narrative. No reader can interpret it in a detached way. A reader-oriented perspective argues that this must be so for any text. Even a text whose meaning was intended to be frozen in an ahistorical context must be reinterpreted in terms of

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[5] F. Watson, Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology, (Edinburgh; T&T Clark, 1997), p28, note 1. Watson discusses the place of writing in the recording of historical events at p42-45.

[6] So, Watson, Text and Truth, p41, He quotes A. Cook, *History/Writing,* 1988, p1, "History writing is a form of literature; it could be said that it began as such. But it carries, in its very conception, as especially sharp angle on what it designate. It lays claim both rhetorically and actually, to a validity of correspondence 0to the public processes of the real world." Watson comments, "Historical discourse's assumption of a subordinate relationship to a prior historical reality precludes a purely literary or rhetorical analysis which abstracts from the intention to speak truthfully about the past. On the other hand, the susceptibility of historical discourse to literary and rhetorical analysis indicates that to see it as pure repetition of 'how it actually was' is inadequate." p42.

immediate historical engagement. If such reinterpretation uncovers a metaphorical description of a transcendent reality required to be presupposed before sense can be made of it, we have 'Logocentrism',

> Historical narrative strives to uncover the coherence of time as a whole...Within the Christian tradition, this view of history can best be described as logo centric. Christ is the Logos who forms the centre through which beginning and end form a unified reality...The book remains caught in a closely-knit web of signification. The network of signs articulated in the book presupposes a closure that is intended to render experience intelligible.[7]

Our argument is that a 'logocentric' perspective is neither impossible nor unnecessary, but it cannot be presupposed. It has to be uncovered within the interacting of the individual stories comprising the historical narrative. You cannot presuppose a macro-hermeneutic solution, but interaction at a micro-hermeneutic level may yield it up. Biblical logocentrism may not be able to be confirmed, its truth may be provisional, only able to be believed. Its vindication may be eschatological, hence the significance of resurrection which allows belief to flourish in anticipation of its vindication. Reliance on such provisional vindication does not deny potential truth, even potential truth described in Logocentric terms. The Bible comprises a closed canon, but it does not necessarily invite the presupposition of closure, the imposition of order. This is because it remains open to the future, drawing the future into itself.

3. The Emergence of a Hermeneutic Methodology.

A. Pre-Modern Hermeneutics. A Theological Discipline.

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[7] Mark C. Taylor, Erring - A Post-Modern A/theology, [Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1984], p14.

i) A Pre-Christian Perspective.

'Hermeneutics' means 'theory of interpretation'. The word 'hermeneutic' derives from the Greek 'Hermeneia', and was originally concerned with matters of expression, interpretation and translation.[8] The Western tradition of hermeneutics can be traced to the Graeco-Roman classical period during which it was important to determine the meaning, role and function of literary texts. Literary texts were divinely inspired foundational texts presented in the form of 'historical' narrative. A methodology of interpretation emerged, relying on an allegorical perspective - unlocking the meaning of the text by using a key supplied from outside the text, - and a grammatical perspective - a consideration of the linguistic devices and connections used in the text, according to a key supplied from inside the text.

The development of the allegorical interpretation of Homer's texts was promoted by some later interpreters who read as symbolic those passages in the texts whose literal interpretation would have caused suspicion in a cultural context different from the one in which the texts originally appeared, especially in terms of moral norms and conventions. As long as the Homeric texts were treated as Divinely inspired and therefore as being above any substantial critique, such suspicion would have been unacceptable. Hence the allegorical method proved to be very useful tool

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[8] The comprehensive nature of hermeneutic activity is indicated by the range of applications of the Greek verb, 'hermeneuein', "Beginning with the root concept of this word group, 'bringing the unclear to clarity', ancient usage is employed to score three points in regard to the overall task of literary interpretation. The first is that the use of language is itself an act of interpretation...To speak (or to write) at all is to interpret one's meaning to another. The second point follows from the first. Not all use of language is clear in its interpretation of meaning. Discourse is not usually univocal. In order to achieve clarity it requires interpretation in the form of explanation or commentary. The sense of hermeneia here is synonymous with its Greek parallel, exegesis, indicating that the familiar distinction between hermeneutics as the theory and exegesis as the practice of interpretation is a modern one that disappears altogether in this vision of the scope of hermeneutics. The third point suggests the material task of all literary interpretation. As used in Antiquity, hermeneia also denotes translation...Translation thus involves saying the same thing in a different language. But this frequently requires that the meaning be stated differently. For the goal of translation is the equivalence of meaning." T.W. Gillespie, *Biblical Authority and Interpretation: the Current Debate on Hermeneutics,* in Mckim, (ed.), A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics, p194-195.

> for saving textual integrity and rationality beyond the hermeneutical and cultural gap. This approach to the 'sacred texts' allowed the reader to search for ways of understanding the meaning of these texts without being forced to dwell on their literal message which may have sounded ridiculous or even obscene.[9]

Equally important for appreciating the roots of Christian theological hermeneutics is its development within the Jewish context.[10] This is best illustrated by the 'Torah' - God's own words - truth for life. If the Torah was to function in this way then ongoing interpretation would be necessary in order to be able to be made sense of by God's people in any place, at any time. Four distinct methods of interpretation emerged; literalist, midrashic, Pesher, and allegorical;[11] according to which texts were understood to point beyond themselves to a deeper reality.[12] From both Greek and Jewish approaches to interpretation, common methodological features suggest themselves; going beyond the literal meaning of a text, integrating the interpretation of a text into a larger contextual framework. At the same time, the establishing of rules prescribing the range of such activity to protect identity and coherence. This common hermeneutic methodology provided the means by which competing religious traditions could engage with one another in the first century CE.

> It was necessary to defend Judaism against rivals, especially against Hellenistic religion (represented by Homer) and philosophy (represented by Plato and his successors). One of the main tasks confronting Philo was

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[9] Jeanrond, Theological Hermeneutics, p15.
[10]Bray notes that, "Biblical interpretation as we understand it began in the period between the testaments...but even earlier than this, there is a sense in which Deuteronomy can be said to be the first example of Biblical interpretation, and its appearance in the Torah enshrines the principles of hermeneutics in the most basic of all scriptural documents...It is from about 400BCE that writings start to appear in which it is assumed that an authoritative body of scriptures already exists." Biblical Interpretation : Past and Present, (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), p47. Bray discusses the chronological development of interpretative strategies within the various Jewish communities, p47-56.
[11] Philo of Alexandria (ca. 25BCE - 50CE), used such a method to demonstrate how the Jewish Scriptures could be meaningful in a Graeco-Roman culture.
[12] Jeanrond, Theological Hermeneutics, p17.

to demonstrate that Judaism was superior to Hellenism both as a religion and as a philosophy, a task that he accomplished by saying that Plato stole all his best ideas from Moses. Interestingly enough, this issue surfaces only sporadically in the New Testament and is never dealt with systematically. On the other hand, the early Christians were preoccupied with the need to demonstrate the superiority of their beliefs over against traditional Judaism, a sure sign that they would not long remain within its confines.[13]

The interpretation of the Christian message did not merely entail the triumph of one 'idea' over another, but also the transforming of all other ideas in the light of it.

ii) Emerging Christian Hermeneutics; The Patristic Period.

The Christian faith was cradled within the Jewish tradition, seeing itself as fulfilling the promises given to the Jews as recorded within their scriptures. One of its first tasks was to re-interpret the Hebrew scriptures in the light of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, thereby establishing a systematic theology from an interpretation of historical events.[14] A concurrent task was the formulation of the Christian canon and the integrating of the Old and New Testaments comprising the Christian scriptures so as to rebut the challenge of the likes of Marcion.[15] Christian understanding of the Hebrew scriptures was shaped by the

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[13] Bray, Biblical Interpretation, p56.

[14] See, T.F. Torrance, Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), concerning the relationship that must exist between the establishing of fundamental theological themes, and practices of Biblical interpretation; "Here too one finds the intimate relationship between techniques of exegesis and theology. Once one realises that traditional allegorical themes were founded not on a naive conception of the meaning of texts but on the complex significance of the events to which the texts referred, it becomes apparent that allegorical theory points towards possible, fascinating complexities in pre-modern theologies [of creation]. L. Ayres, Reviews in Religion and Theology 1996/4, p82.

[15] Views attributed to Marcion to the effect that no such continuity needed to be established because, in terms of the insights offered up by Gnosticism, we can distinguish between the 'false god' of the Old Testament and the 'True God' of the New Testament. Such views have from time to time re-emerged within Christian history concerning the efficacy of some or all of the Old Testament. See Watson, Text and Truth, Ch. 4, *Erasing the Text: Readings in Neo-Marcionism,* p127f.

extra-textual conviction that in Jesus, God had fulfilled promises described in the Hebrew scriptures. This invited an allegorical interpretation of the 'Old Testament referred to as 'typological', distinguished from the 'allegorical' by its intention to preserve the historical continuity between what was, and what is, what was being understood as a 'type' of what is. Such typological interpretation also provided a suitable tool for avoiding the charge of syncretism. Even for the new 'New Testament', its basis for interpretation had to be allegorical. The key was to interpret the texts from a Christocentric perspective.

> The Christocentric bias of the early period produced tendencies towards typological and allegorical exegesis[16]

Hence the need for grammatical integrity. The text needed to generate from within the justification necessary for it to be a legitimate subject for allegorical interpretation; grammatical integrity could not be compromised by allegorical zeal. However, the immediate challenge was somewhat different. Allegorical interpretation of texts was yielding up different meanings of the same text[17]. Rather than seek a grammatical criterion for determining between competing views, early Christianity invoked an ecclesiastical criterion. This was effectively a grammatical criterion in that the Church derived authority directly from the text, although always acknowledging itself subservient to the text.

Only the legitimate community of Christian interpreters is in a position to provide the framework necessary for authentic Christian interpretation.[18]

> This ecclesiastical criterion became the sole basis for determining whether an interpretation was authentic.[19]

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[16] Bray, Biblical Interpretation, p97.

[17] Bray, points to the different ways in which 'salvation' history came to be understood. Either in a linear fashion as described by Tertullian, or in a recapitulatory or cyclical fashion as described by Irenaeus. Bray notes that, "Many of the later differences between West and East can be explained by the fact that the former adopted the linear view of history and the latter the cyclical, and each read the Bible accordingly." Biblical Interpretation, p99.

[18] Jeanrond, Theological Hermeneutics, p20, quoting Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses.*

[19] Tertullian, De Prescriptione Haereticorum. See the excerpt in English, *Heretics have no right to the Scriptures*, in A New Eusebius: Documents illustrative of the History of the Church to A.D. 337, [London: SPCK, 1981], p181f.

Within the 'Alexandrian tradition' the language of the biblical text was understood in terms of symbols requiring allegorical interpretation. The task of the interpreter was to discern the spiritual sense of the text; a text not to be read literally but allegorically.[20] On this approach, Steinmetz comments,

> Simply because a story purports to be a straightforward historical narrative does not mean that it is in fact what it claims to be. What appears to be history may be metaphor or figure instead and the interpreter who confuses metaphor with literal fact is an interpreter who is simply incompetent. Every Biblical story means something, even if the narrative taken at face value contains absurdities or contradictions. The interpreter must demythologise the text in order to grasp the sacred mystery cloaked in the language of actual events.[21]

This is a more sophisticated way of approaching this literal/spiritual distinction. It challenges the interpreter to appreciate the narrative force of the text in terms of its internal interpretative function as much as its factual, descriptive function. The 'Alexandrian' approach to hermeneutics sought to develop a theological system in terms of biblical interpretation, at the same time realising the dialectic nature of such development in that as biblical interpretation informed theological understanding, so theological understanding shaped biblical interpretation. This developed out of an appreciation of the actual nature of the text, especially the Gospels. The human experiences of Jesus should be taken literally because of the historical reality of the incarnation.[22]

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[20] For instance, Origen regarded all Scripture as being inspired of God; the fulfilment of prophecy set out in the Old Testament in the person of Jesus being proof of this.Origen's contrast between the literal and the spiritual offered a particular refinement of great significance within the unfolding history of hermeneutic activity, illustrated by his treatment of the creation story described in Genesis Ch. 1."I do not think that anyone will doubt that there are figurative expressions which indicate certain mysteries through a semblance of history and not through actual event.Origen, *On First Principles* in D. C. Steinmetz, *The Superiority of pre-Critical Exegesis,* in McKim (ed.), A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics, p67.

[21] Steinmetz, in McKim, (ed.), A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics, p67.

[22] Therefore, Athanasius regarded the incarnation as the key to understanding the biblical text. It was the Word of God in a literal, 'incarnate' sense. For Athanasius, Divine inspiration of the Biblical text was directly parallel to the incarnation of Christ, and the relationship between Word and Spirit was the same for both. Like Jesus, the biblical text was fully human (though without error) and fully divine. Athanasius linked a Christocentric interpretation of the biblical text with a dogmatic affirmation of Christ's two natures.Bray.

In contrast, the 'Antiochene tradition' gave greater emphasis to the grammatical approach, insisting on the historical reality of the Biblical text.[23] There is no hidden meaning to the text, any higher or deeper meaning was based directly on the letter of the text. The contrast with the Alexandrian approach is best captured within the Christological dimension.[24]

It is easy to polarise the two 'schools' of thought. This would be unfair. Whilst they differed in matters of degree, each was consistent in the application of two basic principles; the allegorical, and the grammatical. It was the task of the interpreter to balance the tension generated by these two principles in order that they were applied creatively in interpreting the biblical text. Theological ideas existed in creative tension, hence the need for the ecclesiastical determination of the relative merits of controversial interpretations. The views expressed within the two schools were brought to a form of synthesis by Augustine, using rules established by Tyconius in the 4th century.[25] Augustine's particular contribution to this unfolding historical development was his'theory of signs' - developed in De Doctrina Christiana.[26] It was based upon the communicative functions of a sign. A sign referred to a reality, but was not itself equivalent to what it referred; signs were signifiers. The biblical text is the human text that refers to God. It guides the reader as to a proper attitude towards God, towards himself, and towards others. Augustine drew a distinction between what we use, and what we enjoy. What we

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Biblical Interpretation,, p104. Subsequent theological controversies concerning Christ's two natures have also been within the context of conflicts over interpretative methodology concerning Scripture. E.g. The dispute between Luther and Zwingli regarding the doctrine of presence in the Eucharist; and also the Christology from above/Christology from below debate in the 19th century which was fuelled as much as anything by the adoption of an historico-critical methodology as regards interpreting the Biblical text.

[23] E.g. Theodore of Mopsuestia, (c350-428CE), said to take issue with Origen, regarding his views as a dangerous denial of the actual reality of Bible stories. - Jeanrond. Theological Hermeneutics, p21.

[24] For instance, Severian of Gabala, (fl. c. 400-410CE), who practised an extreme form of literalistic exegesis, insisted that it is one thing to preserve the historical sense and add the spiritual to it, and quite another to confuse the historical sense by allegory. Like Christ himself, Scripture had two natures, which could not be confused, mingled or distorted in any wayBray, Biblical Interpretation, p106.

[25] Bray, pp107-108.

[26][Augustines theory of signs saw the] "exploiting of an allegorical reading method...Trained in classical rhetoric he had sufficient semiotic sensitivity to realise quickly how distorting a free-floating allegorical reading of the Biblical text could be...He advocated a thorough linguistic analysis of a text in order to control the accompanying spiritual reading of it." Jeanrond, Theological Hermeneutics, p22

use is changeable, a guide to how to enjoy the unchangeable. We use the biblical text as a guide to how to enjoy God. Enjoyment of God is via love. Augustine established a semiotic framework allowing the interpretation of a text from without while also identifying a 'reading perspective' - love - derived from within the text: a 'rule of faith' - 'faith in action' - 'faith praxis'. The text yields its own interpretative key. This avoids crude literalism and arbitrary allegorisation by generating its own theological reading perspective. The interpreter distinguishes between natural signs and given signs. All linguistic signs are set in conventions therefore an appreciation of the appropriate linguistic convention is always necessary. Signs may refer either directly or figuratively. Augustine argued that if it sounded as if the word was being used literally, then let it be so. On the other hand, a proper understanding of a word used figuratively was determined by asking if such use led to the establishing of the Kingdom of love. Signs might be unknown or ambiguous as far as the reader is concerned. Therefore, the interpreter should always consider the context in which such signs were being used, appeal to other relevant knowledge, seek guidance from the Church, be honest and diligent in the task.

iii) The Contribution of the Medieval Period.

The post-Augustinian period concentrated on formalising the dynamic generated by the 'faith - praxis' key to interpreting the biblical text, while still utilising the distinction between the allegorical and the grammatical. There emerged the 'fourfold' sense, the literal supplemented by three spiritual senses, the allegorical, the anagogical and the tropological, corresponding to the theological virtues of faith, hope and love.[27] This period also saw the emergence of 'glosses,'[28]

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[27] As developed by John Cassian, 360-435CE.

[28] "Explanations of text passages, and glosses of former glosses, called sententiae. This tradition has led to a highly complex philological exercise which since the twelfth century was more and more considered to hinder rather than to help the appropriation of the sacred texts." Jeanrond, Theological Hermeneutics, p29

furnishing readers with an authoritative interpretation based on the work of interpreters of former generations. Eventually they stifled creativity as far as interpretation was concerned as they assumed a significance equivalent to the text itself.[29]

Against this background we note the views of Thomas Aquinas.

> The author of Holy Scripture is God in whose power it is to signify His meaning, not by words only, but by things themselves. So, whereas in every other science things are signified by words, this science [i.e. theology].has the property that the things signified by the words have themselves also a signification Therefore that first signification whereby words signify things belongs to the first sense, the historical or literal. That signification whereby things signified by words have themselves also a signification is called the spiritual sense, which is based on the literal, and presupposes it.[30]

This approach of Aquinas has a particular outcome in mind,

> Thus, for Thomas, understanding the literal sense is what any theologian should strive for. His devaluation of the allegorical sense is a sign of his determination to provide theology with a scientific basis. All theological thinking was to be organised in a way that would meet the newly formulated scientific standards.[31]

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[29]However, production of glosses did prove productive in another direction, "Initially the purpose of the extended, or continuous gloss was to provide a textbook explaining the text's meaning, but as time went on it gradually came to include theological questions (quaestiones) as well. These questions were frequently raised by monks and nuns who were puzzled by the text, and wanted to understand it more deeply. Commentators endeavoured to cater for them within the gloss framework, but this eventually became too unwieldy. The quaestiones gradually ousted the literal commentary, and this led to a division of labour. In the final stage of development during this period, Peter Lombard took the step of extracting the quaestiones from his Magna Glossatura - ('Great Gloss') -and reordering them in a systematic way. This became his famous Sentences, a book that was used to teach systematic theology for the rest of the Middle Ages. It is important to bear in mind that systematics grew out of exegetics, and as long as Lombard was read, it continued to bear the stamp of his origin." Bray, Biblical Interpretation p148-149.

[30] Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, Ia.1, 10, in Jeanrond, Theological Hermeneutics, p28-29.

[31] Jeanrond, Theological Hermeneutics, p29.

During this period theology came to be based on philosophical speculation employing logic and dialectic, exposing the biblical text to the methodologies inherent in philosophical speculation. Once the internal connection between Biblical interpretation and systematic theology had been broken, theology having become contingent upon philosophy, Biblical interpretation became a tool of philosophical theology, its methodology constrained by a wider dimension - scholasticism.[32] Such diverse philosophical ideas as emerged over time generated a momentum that was harnessed by the Reformation. Although the Reformers regarded 'return to sources' as justification for their approach, such a 'return' was itself provoked by philosophical developments within the 'scholastic' period.[33]

iv) The Contribution of the Reformation.

Renaissance learning led to a different approach to interpretation: examining the texts in the original languages. The Reformation's theological roots may be traced back to Augustine. Yet there was a radical departure from Augustine as far as biblical interpretation was concerned. Augustine applied an ecclesiastical criterion regarding questions of authority. The Reformers used the text to examine the authority of ecclesiastical practices. Such divergence emerged out of a

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[32] This is an anachronism that, "could be argued to be the invention of humanist writers, anxious to discredit the movement which it represented...In their concern to discredit the ideas of the medieval period, in order to lend enhanced attraction to their appeal to the classical period, the humanists had little interest in drawing distinctions between the various types of 'scholastics' - such as Thomists and Scotists. The word, 'scholasticism' is thus both pejorative and imprecise; yet the historian cannot avoid using it." McGrath, Reformation Thought: An Introduction, [2nd ed.], (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p67-68.

[3] Within the 'scholastic' period the philosophical debate concerning realism and nominalism flourished. Nominalism provided impetus for theological reform. Part of the legacy of nominalism came to be known as the *Schola Augustiniana Moderna*; a harnessing of scholastic philosophy to the prescholastic theology of Augustine.

problem of conflict between a truthful reading of Scripture and an authoritarian understanding of the right of ecclesiastical authorities to determine the ultimate meaning of the Biblical text.[34]

The biblical text was believed to be the Word of God, and as such self-interpreting.[35] However, 'Sola Scriptura' did not equate to 'verbal inspiration of the Bible.' The Holy Spirit was the 'author' of the Biblical text. God 'speaking' clearly and coherently, in a way sufficient for salvation. The text was not the words of God, - it revealed the Word of God to the faithful interpreter. This suggests a circular argument; an adequate interpretation of the biblical text being consequent upon an existential decision regarding faith, a decision needing to be prompted by the biblical text. However, if we are confronted by the 'Word of God' in terms of being 'of the world', the Holy Spirit causes us to understand the 'Word of God' in terms of being 'of faith'. It is not the 'Word' which does this, but the Spirit active in and through the 'Word'. Understanding the 'Word' in terms of being 'of faith', its meaning mediated by the Holy Spirit, is in accord with an overall Christological coherence, the interpretive key according to which we understand the meaning of particular biblical texts.[36]

Luther's particular existential insights set alongside Calvin's more systematic approach[37] bequeaths a legacy which defines the biblical text as being itself the 'rule of faith'

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[34] Jeanrond, Theological Hermeneutics, p31.

[35] Bray identifies three issues at the heart of Reformation concern in respect of the biblical text: Firstly, 'it was necessary to find a principle of authority on which Christian faith and experience could be credibly grounded': secondly, 'It was necessary to expound the Bible in a way which would make its true meaning clear': thirdly, 'It was necessary to defend a particular theological position on the basis of scriptural teaching.' Bray, Biblical Interpretation, p189-190.

[36] In noting the need for 'overall Christological coherence', we note the Christological controversies of the Patristic period which were very much bound into the issue of the 'meaning' of the text. The Reformation was not spared Christological controversy. The dispute between Luther and Zwingli regarding the 'real presence' of Christ in the Eucharist. - a dispute about the meaning of the text, "This is my body", or a theological dispute concerning the ubiquity or otherwise of Christ's two natures?

[37] Bray, Biblical Interpretation, p201-204.

> For Calvin, who was more faithful to humanist principles than Luther, the Bible itself was the ultimate norm of Christian faith rather than a particular theological interpretation of it.[38]

However, this method of interpreting the biblical text sowed the seeds of a potentially destructive aftermath; belief in 'the verbal inspiration of the whole Bible.'[39] Appealing to direct verbal inspiration as the interpretive key for interpreting the Biblical text led to the doctrine of biblical infallibility, the text having been dictated verbatim by the Holy Spirit. This resulted in the Christian faith being understood in terms of intellectual assent to dogmas derived from this infallible text. Even though Reformation teaching encouraged a dispositional outlook to Christian belief, its immediate aftermath saw an abrupt return to a propositional basis for believing.[40]

Cupitt criticises a scholastic interpretation of Christian theology generated by a particular way of interpreting the biblical text. This 'scholastic' perspective held the stage for a relatively short period whether in terms of the medieval period, or the immediate post-Reformation era. The sterility of the 17th century spawned the 18th century's cry for a transformation of the foundation upon which biblical interpretation was established. It became necessary to employ a truly critical reading style.[41]

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[38] Jeanrond, Theological Hermeneutics, p34.

[39] Known as the 'Protestant orthodoxy' which was to dominate during the 17th century.

[40] "Orthodox theologians understood human reason only as a handmaiden of theology...Orthodoxy is proud of the rationalist arguments through which it thought to safeguard the concerns of the Christian faith, but it doesn't permit human reason to be critical. "Jeanrond, Theological Hermeneutics, p37.

[41] The rigid dogmatism of the proponents of Biblical infallibility on account of direct verbal inspiration did not either demand or justify the advocating of a 'critical reading style' "The defenders of the single-meaning theory usually concede that the medieval approach to the Bible met the religious needs of the Christian community, but that it did so at the unacceptable price of doing violence to the Biblical text. The fact that the historical-critical method after 200 years is still struggling for more than a foothold in that same religious community is generally blamed on the ignorance and conservatism of the Christian laity and the sloth or moral cowardice of its pastors. I would like to suggest an alternative hypothesis. The medieval theory of levels of meaning in the Biblical text , with all its undoubted defects, flourished because it is true, while the modern theory of a single meaning, with all its demonstrable virtues, is false. Until the historical-critical method becomes critical of its own theoretical foundations and develops a hermeneutical theory adequate to the nature of the text which it is interpreting, it will remain restricted - as it deserves to be - to the guild and academy, where the question of truth can be endlessly deferred." Steinmetz, in McKim (ed.), A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics, p77. The adoption of a historical-critical methodology was more to do with the dawn of the 'age of reason', the 'Enlightenment', and the impact of its philosophical

B. The Hermeneutics of the Modern period: A Philosophical Discipline.

Prior to the modern period, interpreting of the biblical text had been the preserve of the theologian. With the onset of 'Enlightenment', biblical texts were investigated in the same way as any other text. The methodology appropriate to such a task was still 'hermeneutics', now a general philosophical discipline according to which specific texts would be studied. This led to the separating out of textual exegesis and hermeneutics. Philosophical hermeneutics was not merely concerned with the meaning of an individual text - the micro-hermeneutic task, nor with discerning the essential meaning of 'the universe and its history' - the macro-hermeneutic task; it sought to identify the key according to which every aspect of human existence should be interpreted. It sought to describe the process of self-understanding. Priority was given to a hermeneutics of the self in order that the self might interpret all else in terms of what the self understood itself to be.

> This theory of interpretation, or hermeneutics, began historically as critical reflection on the nature and interpretation of texts. With the work of Schleiermacher and especially Dilthey, however, hermeneutics also embraced the interpretation and understanding of human persons, or of that which is 'Other' in human life.[42]

Schleiermacher's contribution was in response to Kant regarding a basis for truth and meaning. "In the language of the discipline, a hermeneutic of suspicion operates alongside a hermeneutic of creative understanding."[43] Schleiermacher

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constraints. The fact that Biblical hermeneutics had become so sterile, made it ripe for exploitation by those who advocated such a 'modern' approach. This was a gradual infiltration, but came to its 'crowning glory' in the 19th century; some would say, in anticipation of its inevitable 'dethronement' by the revolutionary forces of postmodernism. For a summary of its background, see Bray, Biblical Interpretation, p221-229.

[42] A. Thiselton, Interpreting God and the Post-modern Self, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p47.

[43] A. Thiselton, p42.

discerned within the human subject the ability for creative understanding over against the capacity for acquiring critical knowledge. This provided the basis for his hermeneutics, and suggested the possibility of a Biblically based theology expressed in terms of a Divine/inter-personal relationality subject to the scrutiny of critical rationality. The biblical text came to be interpreted in terms of the interacting of the 'life of God' - Divine self-understanding, and the 'life of the world' - teleological ontology: embracing the 'individual human life' -personal self-recognition, and 'life in God in the world' - salvific relationality. In interpreting the biblical text this way, self-recognition is revealed to be discernible only in terms of a salvific relationality, an appreciation of the life of God in the world, the encountering of the individual by the life of God in the world.

> To equate personal understanding with scientific knowledge of a physical object would be like claiming to understand a Beethoven symphony by mapping out its sound-waves on an oscilloscope.[44]

The hermeneutics of the modern period invites us to appreciate the possibility of two forms of 'knowledge' concerning the self; epistemological and existential; each offset by acknowledging the integrity of the 'other' in terms of that with which engagement was sought, whether it be a text or a person. Such acknowledgement demanded humility sufficient to allow the possibility of being brought into relationship with the 'other' as much as seeking to relate to the 'other'.[45] This is particularly true when speaking of the biblical text which not only offers itself as that which might be encountered in order that we might relate to it in so doing allowing something of our 'self' to be discerned from such an encounter - it also reveals God as One who relates to and with those whom He encounters according to the way described in the biblical text. Through an encounter with the biblical text we understand 'self' according to the way we relate to God, the One whose own 'Self' is revealed within it. To so engage

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[44] E. Betti, quoted A. Thiselton, Interpreting God,, p42.
[45] For example, the 'Numinous' in R. Otto, The Idea of the Holy, (Oxford: OUP, 1936)

demands an essential vulnerability, albeit a vulnerability matched by God as manifest in Incarnation, in order to understand 'self' in terms of relationship. Such an approach can collapse into some form of empirical, even positivist enquiry when the 'mere' meaningfulness of the language is the issue. All that leaves is 'mere observation', allowing both author and reader to remain within their own self-conscious existence, each able to manipulate the other in terms of how each might understand the other without having to concede that understanding may involve a reciprocal relationship.

However, the tension referred to earlier in respect of creative understanding and critical enquiry became too hard to balance. Critical enquiry expressed through historical/critical exegesis came to dominate, demanding the elimination of any realist hermeneutic in order that creative understanding might be free from any alleged supernatural constraint. Cupitt's plea is for philosophical hermeneutics to bring to life texts rendered dead by such exegetical fervour. However, he will not admit the possibility of a realist hermeneutic, liberated from the constraining influence of a philosophical framework, doing the self-same thing. Cupitt appears to deny the possibility that the tension between creative understanding and critical enquiry is able to be balanced in terms of a self-existing God into whose nature and purpose we can enquire; whose nature and purpose can at the same time be understood in terms of creative understanding through the establishing of direct Divine-human relationship. This enables the human self to be interpreted in terms of the reality of God just as the reality of God is offered in terms of revelation. [46]

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[46] Hence, the way in which post-modern, 'literary' hermeneutics came to assume the exegetical insights of the modern period. This gives rise to what Fowl describes as, "Intratextual theology, [which], threatens to degenerate into a self-referential theology in which God becomes simply the production of human textual interpretation", Engaging Scripture, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p23-24; or as Watson comments, "The God who may be said, intrasystematically, to have created the world becomes without remainder, the product of human linguistic practices", Text, Church and World, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), p152. Our contention is that the biblical text mediates such extra-textual reality. There is a sense in which there is no immediate access to this extra-textual reality, not in terms of the equating of text and reality, but rather that the text describes the mediation of such extra-textual reality, and provides the hermeneutic key according to which any revelation of this extra-textual reality might be interpreted. The reasonableness of this assertion is

C. The Hermeneutic perspective in post-modern Thought.

Postmodernity emerges out of the modern period, but is best understood as a reaction to it. Modernity harbours within itself the 'seeds of its own destruction', "the two main joists of twentieth-century anti-realism"[47] - sociology of knowledge, and linguistic idealism. "Much post-modern theology to date has hung its anti-foundationalism from these two philosophical joists."[48] Hermeneutics has not been exempt from such influences, whether as a general philosophical discipline or the particular discipline of interpreting the biblical text, although such particular activity cannot be divorced from developments in general theological and philosophical ideas.[49] Far from disciplines being divorced, an emphasis on the linguistic or literary, be it actual or illustrative, has served to marry otherwise disparate activities.[50] Our concern is to highlight the key developments regarding the interpretation of the biblical text, and consider their relative significance.

The post-modern age has witnessed the emergence of the 'new literary criticism'[51] alongside the historical-critical method characteristic of the modern

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confirmed by the presence of a continuing community testifying to God's continuing action, itself a continuation of God's activity as described in the text, within the anticipation of its eschatological framework. Fowl, Engaging Scripture, p20.

[47] G. Ward, *Theological Materialism,* in C. Crowder, (ed.), God and Reality, p144.

[48] G. Ward, p144.

[49] Nothing considered in this section would have been possible outside the broad philosophical/linguistic developments embracing phenomenology, structuralism and post-structuralism. Such movements have often been understood in terms of personalities. The history of post-modern thought continues to be shaped by a cast of thousands, all of whom, deserve mention, consideration, and critical appraisal! See the 6-fold analysis of responses to postmodernism in D.Stiver, *Much Ado About Athens and Jerusalem: The Implications of Postmodernism for Faith.* Review and Expositor, Vol. 91, 1994, p83-102. Also the 4-fold analysis of the response of theology to Postmodernity in D.R. Griffin, (ed), Varieties of Post-modern Theology, (Albany: State University of New York, 1989), p1-7. These issues are discussed in D.A. Carson, The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism, (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), Ch. 3.

[50] The courtship extended from the time of Schleiermacher, throughout the modern period. Betrothal had to wait until the time of Heidegger, although it could be argued that all he envisaged was a 'marriage of convenience' in order to preserve some sense of a metaphysical presence, even if ontotheology was now redundant; a 'modern' marriage.

[51] To acknowledge the closeness of the general philosophical dimension and the particular issue of the interpretation of the Biblical text, the emerging 'new' literary criticism must be set within the context of the so-called 'new' hermeneutic. Brought together, these ideas have been described as the 'linguistic turn' - a term associated with Richard Rorty. See, D. Stiver, The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol, and Story. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996). For a theological evaluation, see J. Milbank, The Word Made

period. This 'new literary criticism' may not have displaced the historical-critical method, but it has challenged its claim to objectivity. Indeed, Although described as 'new', such 'literary criticism' is born out of the ancient traditions of biblical interpretation. It is the subsequent separation of literary readings from theological/religious readings that is modern and is due to the universal acceptance of the prior claim of historical criticism re Scriptural Interpretation.[52] Hence "Historical-critical study was at best only a preliminary to the real task of theological, pneumatic exegesis."[53] This new approach to the utilisation of historical-critical methodology was known as neo-orthodoxy,[54] and was far removed from more avant-garde approaches found within the emerging world of literary criticism which,

> Did not view the text as a 'window' onto a historical world but as a 'mirror' reflecting a world into which the reader is invited.[55]

Implicit in this comment is what is central to the 'new literary approach' - 'reader-response criticism', according to which,

> The focus has shifted away from the intention of the author and the original context of the writing to the response of the reader in determining the meaning and significance of the text.[56]

This in turn operated within the wider context of Derridaean post-structuralist philosophy which challenged what it termed the 'metaphysics of presence' by

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Strange: Theology, Language, Culture, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), Ch. 4, *The Linguistic Turn as a Theological Turn.*

[52] See S.Prickett, Words and the 'Word': Language, Poetics, and Biblical Interpretation, (Cambridge, CUP, 1986).

[53] Attributed to K. Barth, The Epistle to the Romans, [1918], (ET; Oxford: OUP, 1933). Barth's conclusions in respect of Biblical exegesis in particular, and of hermeneutics in general, appear far removed from those engaging in the so-called 'new' literary criticism. Once the historical-critical method came to be considered alongside other critical approaches, it soon became apparent that there was no longer any acknowledged 'favoured' interpretative methodology. Hence, the attempts to identify parallels between Barth's approach and that of the postmodernists; most recently, W.S. Johnson, The Mystery of God: Karl Barth and the Post-modern Foundations of Theology, (Louisville, Kentucky: W/JKP, 1997).

[54] G. Bray, Biblical Interpretation, Past and Present, (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), p422-423.

[55] S.M. Schneiders, *Hermeneutics, sections 55-70, [pages 1158-1160],* in R.E Brown, J.A. Fitzmyer,. R.E. Murphy, (eds), New Jerome Bible Commentary, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1991 [p/b ed.]), p1159.

[56] D.Jasper, *Literary Readings of the Bible,* in J. Barton, (ed), Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation, (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), p27.

asserting that every text was liable to be deconstructed because any interpretation of any text was not merely non-determinate, it was anti-determinate. We will consider something of Derrida's contribution to the debate in chapter 9. It is sufficient for now to note that whilst the likes of Cupitt will invoke Derrida's views as 'gospel' they are extremely controversial; not merely in terms of the description he offers of language and philosophy, but perhaps more pertinently this description of the world-view he is confronting – 'metaphysics of presence'. So for instance the following perspective,

> The view of anti-determinate interpretation I want to discuss begins from a particular view of determinate interpretation. That is, a particular account of determinate interpretation provides the foil against which to offer the view that interpretation is not determinate. On this view, the notion that biblical (or any other texts) have a single, stable determinate meaning is simply one aspect of a larger series of assumptions and practices that are seen as characteristic of the whole history of western philosophy. This so-called metaphysics of presence seeks mastery of all external things, including texts. [57]

Our contention is that the reasonableness of the claim that the biblical text can be interpreted in terms of a realist theology is not on account of such a metaphysics of presence equated with the Divine, rather that the structure of the text yields up such an interpretation in terms of the response that its readers might give. Interpretation of the biblical text can survive the deconstructing of any metaphysics of presence; it can be regarded as anti-determinate, yet it can still be described in terms of a realist theology because such a view does not necessarily have to be equated with a metaphysics of presence. Ultimately, however, such an intrpretation will have to provide some explanation for all that there is because the text claims as much for itself. This general understanding

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[57] S. Fowl, Engaging Scripture, p41.

can however be seen to arise out of a special revelation rather than being a presupposed frame of reference within which special hermeneutics are carried out.

Hence while the 'real' world of history may appear to disappear into the 'literary' world of the text, this literary world provides the wherewithal by which to live in the real world. Emphasising the literary dimension does not mean that the real world must disappear into it. This is the error of so-called a/theology, which has the reality of God necessarily collapsing into the literary world of the biblical text.[58] Far from collapsing into the literary world of the text, God may have chosen the literary world of the text within which to reveal Himself, accommodating Himself to the world of human language in terms of a dynamic historical revelation as opposed to a static ahistorical representation.[59] 'New literary criticism' has not usurped historical -critical methodology as the 'objective' way of interpreting the biblical text, but it does invite those who read the text to enquire into its meaning, discern its significance and have their interpretation tested within community allowing the twin joists of the 'sociology of knowledge' and 'linguistic idealism' to demonstrate their inherent forcefulness.

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[58]E.g. , M.C. Taylor, and also, Don Cupitt. See G.Ward, *Theological Materialism, p144-145,* for illustrative quotations from each to this effect.

[59] Hence the emergence of New Historicism within the context of 'new literary criticism' which sought to assimilate developments in historiography, the philosophy of history, and literary criticism within the context of Biblical studies. See R.P. Carroll, *Post-Structuralist Approaches: New Historicism &Post-modernism,* in Barton (ed), Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation, p50f "It is resistant of wilder forms of post-modern theory which reject the possibility or desirability of the critical retrieval of the past." P57.

Chapter 8

Considering the Structure of the Biblical Text.

1. Introduction.

Cupitt argues that interpreting the biblical text in terms of realist theology imposes an ahistorical anachronism on an otherwise historical text. He contends that if truth claims are understood as metaphors of a more profound 'truth' claim concerning the nature of human existence, then the biblical text would be able to engage directly with any contemporary historical world. However, it may be that realist theology is itself a product of historical engagement, as such foundational to the hermeneutic task.

> [The] theologian's hermeneutical task is one of 'recasting inherited Christian language into terms at once interpretively faithful and yet accessible to our time'.[1]

The claim that God is real may be validated in terms of the engagement the biblical text has with history because God is revealed in the biblical text as being engaged with history. The biblical text records actual engagement, and also provides the basis according to which the veracity of any alleged Divine/human engagement might be tested. It is therefore crucial to understand the biblical text within the context of the distinction between the ahistorical and the historical.

> It is sometimes argued that the truth of God conveyed through the New Testament is changeless and therefore 'timeless'. Hence, questions about understanding the Bible cannot be said to vary from generation to generation. It is perhaps implied that the truth of the New Testament, because it is the truth of God, stands apart from historical and cultural

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[1] J. Fodor, Christian Hermeneutics: Paul Ricoeur and the Refiguring of Theology, (Oxford: Clarendon. 1995), p30, quoting N.Lash, *Easter in Ordinary,* p175.

change in much the same way as may be claimed for the truth of mathematics. The angles of a triangle add up to 180 degrees independently of what particular triangles a mathematician actually draws. In the language of philosophical logic, such truths are said to be necessary truths rather than contingent truths.

If this is what is meant by claiming that the Bible conveys 'timeless' truth, quite clearly this would not be the view of the Biblical writers themselves. Such a view of truth can be described as theological only if Christianity is built on platonist metaphysics. In practice this view need not detain us, for it is generally accepted today that this view of truth is drawn from Greek philosophy and not from the Bible, and that in any case, a God of 'necessary' truth would be unrelated to human life and experience. This point is expressed admirably by Wolfhart Pannenberg in his essay, *What is Truth?* He writes, "For Greek thought...truth excluded all change...It belongs to the essence of truth to be unchangeable and thus, to be one and the same, without beginning or end."...Pannenberg insists that in the Bible truth is contingent rather than necessary because it is related to historical events. It is "not the result of logical necessity...the truth of God must prove itself anew....Here, true being is thought of not as timeless, but instead as historical, and it proves its stability though a history whose future is always open."[2]

The theological significance of this assertion can be developed thus,

> The contingency of our witness to the truth is, of course predicated on the utter contingency, the sheer grace, of God's own condescension in Jesus Christ. To participate in God's life of reconciliation, God's self-movement of utterance and love, is the Christian's chief joy and task. Indeed inasmuch as God's self-movement is pre-eminently mimetic - i.e. creative,

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[2] A. Thiselton, *Hermeneutica and Theology: The Legitimacy and Necessity of Hereneutics.,* in D.K. McKim, (ed), A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics: Major Trends in Biblical Interpretation. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1986), p153.

> generative, transformative - truthful reference to God and faithful refiguring of oneself in Christ constitute the selfsame movement.[3]

The biblical text seeks to persuade readers that the claims it makes are historical. Hermeneutics invites interpretation of the biblical text from the perspective of a God who encounters in order to elicit response. The category of rhetoric is crucial to this task, and should be applied positively although not uncritically,

> ...what counts as true for one group is often disparaged as a manipulative disguise to legitimate power -claims by another group. If different groups choose to adopt different criteria of truth to determine what counts as true, or even what counts as a meaningful truth-claim, rational argument and dialogue become undermined by recurring appeals to what one group counts as axioms, but seem far from axiomatic for another. At this point argument becomes transposed into rhetoric. Rhetoric then comes to rely on force, seduction or manipulation....some religious people not only use manipulation in place of truth, but may eventually come to believe sincerely in the truth of their own inherited religious rhetoric, even if it may have served initially to further some power interest.[4]

Interpreting the biblical text in terms of dispositional truth claims safeguards it against the manipulation of its rhetoric by demanding that the motivation of its readers is set over and against its internal rhetoric in terms of its particular dispositional demands.[5] To appreciate the significance of the rhetoric of the biblical text, we examine the circumstances which saw rhetoric emerge as a literary device, to see how significant it was to the literary context within which the biblical text was constructed.

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[3] J. Fodor, Christian Hermeneutics, p340.
[4] A. Thiselton, Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p12-13.
[5] "The Christian calling therefore, may equally be described as one of imitating Christ or participating in the life of God. Either way, the result is the same: living in the hope that God's self-giving love may be made palpably present in the world." Fodor, Christian Hermeneutics, p340.

2. The Emergence of Rhetoric.

Rhetoric is, "The study or theory of persuasive communication."[6] Blackburn's definition indicates how we might recognise the significance of rhetoric when interpreting the biblical text,

> [Rhetoric]: The art of using language so as to persuade or influence others. Although rhetoric is apparently opposed to the philosophical ideal of the exact persuit of truth, their reconciliation has sometimes seemed desirable, most notably to Cicero. If one thinks of philosophy as a matter of argument rather than doctrine, as the academic sceptics did, then rhetoric is good practice in argument. The cultivation of this art was an important study in medieval universities, and began to regain ground with the belief, widely shared in the late 20th century, that all discourse contains a political and persuasive core.[7]

Rhetoric emerged within a legal context. It consisted of an introduction or Proem. The stating of the facts, or narration. The speaking for oneself against another, or argument. The conclusion, or peroration. Later, Roman jurists introduced the element of speaking against the case of the other, rebuttal or refutation. However, it is Aristotle who is credited with having introduced rhetoric into general linguistic exchange. For Aristotle, rhetoric was, "The faculty of

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[6] Murphy, Reasoning & Rhetoric, p57. For a wide-ranging consideration of the origin and significance of Rhetoric, see R.Wardy, The Birth of Rhetoric: Georgias, Plato and their Successors. (London: Routledge,1996). A thorough-going enquiry into the continuing significance of rhetoric as far as understanding Christian literature is provided by, Vernon K. Robbins, The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetoric, Society and Ideology, (London, Routledge, 1996)

[7] S. Blackburn, Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, (Oxford: OUP, 1994), p330.
With regard to understanding the Biblical text in terms of rhetorical analysis; - "The ultimate goal of rhetorical analysis is the discovering of the author's intentions and of how it is transmitted through a text to an audience...an author employs 'modes of persuasion'. Such modes may be external or internal...Examples of external modes are quotations from other texts, evidence of miracles, testimony of witnesses...Internal - ethos, the credibility of speaker/writer; pathos, the emotional reaction of hearers; logos, the logical argument present in the text." J.D. Kingsbury, Interpretation, Vol. 40/1, p91-92, reviewing G.A. Kennedy, New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Interpretation, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

discovering in every case the available means of persuasion."[8] Aristotle identified three such means :-

Logos: the appeal to reason, either deductive or demonstrative, not necesarily in order to establish any certainty but in order to stress the probability. It would often involve the use of example.

Ethos: A way of speaking intended to convince an audience of the speaker's good sense, high moral character and benevolent nature.

Pathos: A means of appealing to the emotions of the audience; getting one's hearers to use their imagination by the use of sensory language. It would usually take the form of one of three approaches. Either forensic, employing the scenario of the courtroom; deliberative, employing the scenario within which political decisions were taken; or epideictic, employing the scenario of the apportionment of either praise or blame.[9]

The influence of rhetoric grew within the classical world. Education was devoted to acquiring skills necessary for the effective communicating of ideas through language; analysing written texts in order to read them aloud properly. This demanded rigour and sophisticiation in discerning the meaning of the texts. The purpose of the exercise was to consider the communicative skills of authors in order that students might master such skills for themselves. This was the stuff of rhetoric. Intention, content, and structure were vital components of any composition. The art of persuasion had to be acquired so that the conviction of the author was sufficient to elicit the hoped for response from the audience. Literary texts were not communications to be read privately, they were to be read aloud, publicly.

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[8] Murphy, Reasoning & Rhetoric, p58. See Aristotle, The Art of Rhetoric, ([ET], Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991).

[9] For a consideration of Aristotle's Rhetoric, see Wardy, The Birth of Rhetoric, Part 5.

> An ancient work should be read linearly, as if we were hearing the content unfolding as it was recited or read aloud. The meaning is related to the kind of effect the author intended to produce on the listener.[10]

The challenge to the rhetorician was to write texts capable of being delivered in a sufficiently persuasive fashion; whether by the actual author, or someone reading on his behalf. All of this crystallised during the 1st century CE around the works of Quintillian and Cicero. Such crystallisation saw texts and speeches composed in terms of the interweaving of 5 distinct elements,

Inventio: Invention, the capacity to construct a thesis and support argument.

Collectio (Dispositio); Order, the art of skilful arrangement of material.

Memoria: Memory, the contribution of reciting rather than reading a text.

Elocutio; Ornamentation, the skill of cultivating a persuasive style.

Actio (Pronunciato): Delivery, that which is borne of noble or virtuous intention as demonstrated by one who is expert in his subject.

All of this, deployed effectively, produces Copia: copiousness, which came to be set alongside Imitatio: Imitation, the art of acquiring and using resources.

The whole process of rhetorical construction of discourse is one continuous act of accommodation. This is brought out in the Pseudo-Ciceronian treatise, 'Rhetorica ad Herrenium', "Elocution is the accommodation of suitable words and sentences to invention". Another rhetorician uses the same word in reference to pronunciation: "Pronunciatio is worthiness of words, accommodation of the voice to the senses, and moderation of the body."[11]

Against this literary background the canon of Christian Scripture was compiled. It is therefore reasonable to read such documents from a rhetorical perspective, and to note the significance of accommodation.[12]

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[10] F. Young, *Rhetoric,* in R.J. Coggins & J.l. Houlden, Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation, (London: SCM, 1990), p598.

[11] F.L. Battles, *God was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity*, Interpretation, Vol 31/1, Jan. 1977, p22.

[12] "Whenever a religious tradition is translated from one language to another, an enormous act of accommodation takes place. Such accommodation begins in the Septuagint versions of the Old Testament with their initial restatements of Hebrew religious concepts in Greek; continued in the New Testament

Accommodation was particularly important in the production of Scriptural texts. Unlike the texts of classical rhetoric, which were in large part original productions, they were either translations of what had already been composed within a different historical/religious/cultural/linguistic context; or the writing down in a structured way of that which had already been composed in a fragmentary way, often in a different language. The use of accommodation ensured that the content of the texts did not become 'frozen' in any ahistorical dimension. The Early Church Fathers acknowledged the use of accommodation when interpreting the biblical texts. Two distinct applications of accommodation emerged; a general, literal application, and a particular, theological application. These are contrasted clearly by Irenaeus. He condemned the Gnostics and the Marcionites for their attacks upon the Apostles in claiming that their teaching was structured according to the capacity of their hearers and in so doing subverted the truth. Irenaeus contended that the Apostles taught the true and unaccommodated doctrine that leads to salvation.[13]

> The unmeasurable Father was Himself subject to measure in the Son, for the Son is the measure of the Father, since He also comprehends Him.[14]

Irenaeus counters the charge against the Apostles by arguing that far from subverting the truth, they were actually declaring it. This was not the application of acccommodation in the general, literary sense – it was 'true and unaccommodated doctrine' - but such truth was able to be declared, because God had accommodated such truth to humankind in Jesus Christ, the incarnation of the Eternal Son of God. That is not to say that a general, literal application of accommodation has no place in theological discourse, but it must be subordinated to the particular theological application. It is therefore crucial to appreciate this two-fold application of accommodation within theological

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itself, and moved (as Christianity became a religion of the Gentile world) into the heterodox and orthodox formulations of the Patristic era of the Church." Battles, *God was Accommodating Himself*, p22.

[13] Battles, p23, referring to Irenaeus, Adv. Haer.3.5.2.

[14] Battles, p23, referring to Irenaeus, Adv. Haer.4.4.2.

discourse. The primary application is theological, revelation through Incarnation: the secondary application is the literal, the use of appropriate language to accommodate the message to its hearers and readers. These ideas weave together in the anticipatory voice of the prophet, the actual voice of the Incarnate Son, the annunciatory voice of the proclaimer. The prophet announces in anticipation of the actual event. The Son proclaims the actual fulfilment of that which was prophesied, while at the same time anticipating that which His actual words will accomplish. The proclaimer anticipates such fulfilment in relation to the actual words already spoken. The primary application is theological, yet woven into the literal. Such applications are never mutually exclusive. The challenge is realising how they influence one another creatively. In respect of the biblical text this is to do with claiming that God has revealed Himself so as to be able to be understood both theologically and literally. The early church confronted the challenge through its proclamation.[15]

The way the biblical text came to be interpreted owes as much to its structure as to its content. This is the legacy bequeathed to the history of the Christian tradition by those who interpreted its message during its earliest centuries. However, as far as the literary world is concerned rhetoric was not always in favour; hermeneutics did not always take due note of the rhetorical dimension of texts. This general literary background is critical to any consideration of the way rhetoric has been employed within the Christian tradition.

> Rhetoric is a discipline that has been in and out of fashion over the past 2,500 years. Perhaps there is a cycle; the theory of persuasive discourse is widely taught and studied. Style disintegrates to the point where it becomes mere decoration, and rhetoric is used for persuasion without

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[15] "It was not long after Christianity spread to the Graeco-Roman world that rhetorical theory began to be taught explicitly as a basis for homiletics. Augustine of Hippo, arguably the most influential theologian since the Apostle Paul, believed that the eloquence of the writers of Scripture was unsurpassed, but for those whose job was to teach or preach about these texts, a knowledge of the theory and practice of rhetoric was essential." Murphy, Reasoning & Rhetoric, p85. For Augustine's views on the use of rhetoric by Christian teachers, see Bk. 4 of On Christian Doctrine; what Battles describes as 'The first Christian rhetoric" - Battles, *God was Accommmodating Himself,* p25.

> regard for truth: rhetoricians come to be held in disrepute and the principle of rhetoric must be rediscovered by a new generation.[16]

Rhetoric emerged within the classical period. Within theology it stultified amidst the arid speculation of scholasticism until the Renaissance with its rediscovering of the classical tradition, itself contributing greatly to a theological reformation. The lifeblood of the Reformation was its approach to the biblical text. However, such an approach soon gave way to post-Reformation Protestantism with its concentration on the doctrine of verbal inspiration which gave rise to literalist, inerrantist interpretations of the biblical text. The modern period took hold of a text made brittle, and crushed it in its historical-critical hands. Modernity ebbed away and in rolled the flood tide of post-modernism. The dynamic nature of textual interpretation was re-established and theological hermeneutics was again free.

The force of this dialectic is demonstrated by John Calvin. Calvin's response to scholasticism although primarily theological, was made possible by incorporating particular literary techniques. This is equivalent to the way contemporary realist theology responds to the modern era by utilising 'new literary criticism'. This allows us to challenge Cupitt's assertion that the only theological response to the modern era is to recast theology in non-realist terms. However, Calvin did not emerge out of a vacuum, theologically or culturally.

> It was certainly the destiny of John Calvin to be the father both of modern theology and of modern Biblical exposition. It was he who in the Institutes of the Christian Religion laid the foundations for Biblical and dogmatic theology as they are now pursued.[17]

We need to consider the legacy of medieval scholasticism, its philosophical theology already being exposed to rigorous intellectual investigation by Renaissance humanism, a movement which had significant influence upon

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[16] Murphy,Reasoning & Rhetoric, p67.
[17] T. Torrance, The Hermeneutics of John Calvin, [Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press: 1988], p61.

Calvin. Intellectual humanism was fuelled by a cultural revolution. Indeed, in accord with understanding the 'cycle' identified by Murphy[18] in respect of the appearing, disappearing and reappearing of Rhetoric in terms of a dialectic, it may be that what emerged in the post-scholastic period was a product of a particular dialectic driven by the interactive nature of humanist philosophy and Renaissance learning.[19] Calvin's theological insights were made possible by an emerging intellectual methodology which allowed the philosophical perspective that developed out of humanism to make constructive use of the literary insights which Renaissance learning rediscovered.

3. The Contribution of John Calvin.

A. Calvin's Backgound.

i). The Legacy of Scholasticism.

How far Calvin was influenced by Scholastic theology is hard to determine.

> Several Calvin scholars have formulated hypotheses and developed arguments that affirm or contest the scholastic imprint on Calvin's thought.[20]

Calvin was educated at the College de Montaigu, 1523-1527, and there studied Scholasticism. The predominant scholastic influence at that time was 'termism'.[21] The question that remains unresolved is the extent of the influence of scholastic theology.[22] It is best to understand Scholastic theology as a product of its

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[18] Murphy, Reason & Rhetoric, p67.

[19] "Cicero had attacked the 'fatal disjunction between dialectic and rhetoric...this led to the proliferation of absurd, useless questions that made philosophy irrelevant to actual life, and by emptying oratory of wisdom led to the degeneration of language and culture." Torrance, The Hermeneutics of John Calvin p101.

[20] A. Ganoczy, The Young Calvin, ([ET], Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), p168.

[21] Ganoczy, The Young Calvin, p59-62.

[22] Ganoczy discusses the competing views on p174-178.

philosophy.[23] The beginnings of Calvin's theology may be described as a reaction against the influence of such philosophy in terms of a theology derived directly from the biblical text. Scholastic philosophy may have provided the impetus for theological Reformation to take place in terms of its embracing 'nominalism' rather than 'realism' - the contrast between the 'Via Moderna' and the 'Schola Augustiniana Moderna' out of which Luther developed his ideas.[24] This parallels the dialectic between Renaissance learning and the philosophy of its day as regards an emerging theology.[25]

Regarding the most important influence on Calvin's theological 'education', as far as Ganoczy is concerned it was Luther. By the time Calvin formulated his ideas, Luther had applied the legacy of his scholastic education in initiating his own programme of theological reform. Calvin's subsequent enagagement with scholastic theology was only ever going to be polemical in tone.[26]

Notwithstanding how Calvin acquired knowledge of scholastic theology, he sought to rebut its consequences. Throughout, Calvin was influenced by the humanist philosophy borne out of Renaissance learning. This new humanism allowed Calvin to develop an intellectual framework within which to confront Scholastic theology.

ii). <u>The Contribution of Renaissance Learning.</u>

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[23] "This then is the essence of scholasticism: the demonstration of the inherent rationality of Christian theology by an appeal to philosophhy and the demonstration of the complete harmony of that theology by the minute examination of the relationship of its various elements." McGrath, <u>Reformation Thought,</u> p69.

[24] See McGrath, <u>Reformation Thought,</u> p75-84.

[25] "At Montaigu the young Calvin studied the various disciplines taught by his faculty. Thus he was introduced to a scholastic philosophy that included a technique of dialectic reasoning, a metaphysics that systematically opposed (in nominalist fashion) the divine and the human, and an Aristotelian ethics that was no doubt impregnated with scholastic casuistry." Ganoczy, <u>The Young Calvin,</u> p178.

[26] "We can see that he became familiar with traditional theology only after he had read, appreciated and assimilated the thought of the German reformer. We can see that after comparing Luther's profoundly religious, vital, dynamic, Biblical. and Christ-centred thought to the dryness of the scholastics, Calvin judged Luther to be far superior to the learned compilations and speculations of Gratian and Lombard...Like Luther, his principal tutor in theology, Calvin saw in scholasticism as a whole a dead and evil idol which must be overthrown." Ganoczy, <u>The Young Calvin,</u> p177, p178.

When Calvin wrote his theology, rhetoric had claimed centre stage. This was the contribution of the Renaissance. Although described as 'new learning' it was a product of the study of classical figures such as Cicero.

> Language functions so as to to speak in a way appropriate to persuasion and its end is to persuade by speech. In order to persuade an audience, the language must be appropriate to the nature of the subject matter, and be so adapted to it that the mmatter to which the audience is directed may press itself upon the conviction of the hearers through the language used.[27]

It had taken root with those engaged in public office, especially law and commerce, a legal education being vital to any form of public service. In turn it became part of general university education with the result that this 'cultural linguistic revolution' came to sit alongside already emerging philosophical humanism, each influencing the other. This reflected Calvin's own background; legal training, humanist scholar, theologian.

Parallel to this cultural 'renaissance' was a revolution in communication. The development of printing allowed texts to be read privately without having to be declaimed in public, either by its author or its recipient. This was a significant departure from the classical period, and provided an altogether different perspective regarding rhetorical structure. These developments allowed Calvin to make constructive use of the literary insights recovered from the classical period by the Renaissance. 'Literary criticism' was at the heart of humanist scholarship. The particular aspect of classical rhetoric which Calvin put to effective use was accommodation. It is worth reiterating the significance of accommodation in terms of classical rhetoric as a whole. Classical rhetoric challenged the idea that language was a static representation of mental ideas. The Classical period had invested language with active political force, a sign system whose function was to prove, to please, to sway, to persuade. Language was a constructive tool or a

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[27] Torrance, Hermeneutics of John Calvin, p105.

destructive weapon. However, account had to be taken of one's audience. There needed to be an awareness of aspirations, expectations, dispositions and abilities.

> The eloquence of orators has always been controlled by the good sense of the audience, since all who desire to win approval have regard to the goodwill of their audience, and shape - fingere - and adapt - accommodare - themselves completely according to this and to their opinion and approval.[28]

"Cicero laid himself out to achieve eloquence which he spoke of as the 'accommodation of suitable words to discovery"[29] However,

> This notion of accommodation should not be interpreted, however, as permission for an orator to tell an audience what it wants to hear.[30]

When speaking of God, a degree of humility was necessary,

> Speech about God must respect His majesty and serve His testimony and refrain from the kind of eloquence that would detract from it or obscure His Word.[31]

One needed to determine the rhetorical goal and identify the form of speech appropriate, not to gain applause but to serve the good. It is here that Renaissance learning departed from the medieval tradition. "Better to will the good than to know the truth."[32] The outcome of intellectual engagement should be dispositional, not propositional.

> Useful teachers of virtue and vice are those whose first and last intention is to make hearer and reader good, those who do not merely teach what virtue and vice are and hammer into our heads the brilliant name of one and the grim name of the other, but sow in our hearts love of the best and

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[28] S. Jones, Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety, (Louisville, Kentucky: W/JKP, 1995), p21.
[29] Torrance, Hermeneutics of John Calvin, p107.
[30] Jones, Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety, p21.
[31] Torrance, Hermeneutics of John Calvin, p108.
[32] Jones, Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety, p23.

> eager desire for it, and at the same time hatred of the worst and how to flee from it.[33]

Calvin was schooled in rhetoric. Trained to use language persuasively, aware of the need to shape life by interweaving saying and doing. Calvin's writings are ideal examples of the way in which truth claims might be expressed in contemporary language.

B. Calvin's Appreciation of the Place of Rhetoric in Theological Discourse.

Calvin describes the theologian's task as follows,

> To confirm the conscience by teaching what is true, certain and useful,[34]...(that) our acknowledgement of Him (God) may be more a vivid, actual impression than empty, visionary speculation.[35]...A knowledge which will prove substantial and fruitful wherever it is duly perceived and rooted in the heart[36]

This is discerned by reading the biblical text from a dispositional orientation, for the reader's edification. This is possible due to the activity of the Holy Spirit. The biblical text can only lead to edification according to the activity of the Spirit.

> Our faith in doctrine is not established until we have a perfect conviction that God is its author.[37]
>
> Rhetorical communication, he [Calvin] insisted repeatedly, is God's only way of revealing Himself to human beings; we know nothing of God except through His revelation in Christ "who represents and exhibits for us whatever is useful to be known about the Father."[38]

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[33] Jones, Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety, p24.
[34] Calvin, Institutes, 1.14.4. [ET], Beveridge, (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1989), p144.
[35] Calvin, Institutes, 1.10.2.
[36] Calvin, Institutes, 1.5.9.
[37] Calvin, Institutes, 1.7.4.
[38] W.J. Bouwsma, John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait, (Oxford: OUP, 1988), p125.

The 'eloquence' of the text and the 'power' of the Spirit combine with the 'skill' of the theologian to move the hearts of the faithful. It is here that Calvin's clash with scholasticism is at its sharpest.[39] Yet, how is one moved to faith? According to the rhetorical nature of the descriptions of God's encountering of humankind in the biblical text; demonstrated supremely in the person and work of Jesus Christ, prescribed in terms of the activity of the Holy Spirit. This uniting of the faithful according to the rhetoric of the text delineating continuing Divine activity in Word and Spirit, is secondary to the primary rhetorical activity of Divine grace. Yet, how might grace be appropriated by a sinful humanity? If the mediation of grace is in terms of 'persuasion', and if the purpose of such 'persuasive' activity is salvation, then how consistent with this are the traditional 'Calvinist' doctrines of limited atonement and irresistible grace?[40] This raises a more general concern. How can God be understood as communicating through the biblical text? It cannot be in terms of propositions because the biblical text is not structured to invite assent to propositions. It is a narrative, revealing how God has communicated, is communicating and continues to communicate. It delineates God's intention to encounter persuasively in ways described in the biblical text in order that His purpose be fulfilled. The scholastic approach could not be grounded in the biblical text. This is analogous to the way Cupitt describes how philosophers frame their arguments, drawing 'theological' ideas within them. They too are not capable of being grounded in the biblical text. The 'god' of which they speak is not the God who is said to speak. If God is to speak persuasively, the rhetoric

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[39] "In addition to understanding the persuasive dimension of theology, Calvin, like Cicero, recognises that language is not inherently persuasive, that not all discursive forms are able to move their readers...Calvin acknowledges that some doctrinal formulations, even though they may be true, fall short of their persuasive goal because the language in which they are clothed lacks the passion and eloquence necessary for moving the hearts and souls of the audience...Calvin himself most likely had in mind those 'dreadful' scholastic theologians who could string together logically coherent propositions concerning the content of Divine wisdom but who failed to move the heart or edify the soul." Jones, Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety, p28-29.

[40] Two of the 'five points of Calvinism' as defined at the Synod of Dort, referred to by the acronym, TULIP. T - Total Depravity, U - Unmerited Favour, L - Limited Atonement, I - Irresistable Grace, P - Perseverence of the Saints. For a recent 'redefining' of these 'points', see R.C. Sproul, The Heart of Reformed Theology, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997), referring to: Humanity's Radical Corruption, God's Sovereign Choice, Christ's Purposeful Atonement, The Spirit's Effective Call, God's Preservation of the Saints.

employed has to be accommodatory. The linguistic limitations and social expectations of readers must be taken into account.

C. Calvin's Appreciation of the Role of Accommodation in Theological Discourse.

Accommodation is a feature of rhetoric. For Calvin, accommodation is the key to unlocking the rhetorical style of the biblical text as written, being intended to persuade its readers accordingly.[41] Accommodation for Calvin, as far as the biblical text was concerned, was to do with two movements; a linguistic device so adopted, preceded by a free decision on the part of God not to keep His Word 'shut up in His bosom'. Accommodation may be defined as, "A rhetorical metaphor frequently used by Calvin to refer to God's condescension to the limits and needs of the human condition."[42] Divine rhetoric, containing the element of accommodation, is to do with 'persuading' sinful humanity to God's saving purposes. How this is done is told rhetorically, via the application of the literary device of accommodation within the context of the Biblical text.[43]

> According to Calvin, the forms of revelation are adapted in various ways to the nature of man as the recipient. His general term for the several types of adaptation is 'accommodation'. It is axiomatic for Calvin that God cannot be comprehended by the human mind. What is known of God is

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[41] "The precise aim of rhetoric was to accommodate, to adjust, adapt, or fit one's language in a way that would be suitable to the intended audience." T. George, Theology of the Reformers, (Leicester: Apollos, 1988), p192. Carson brings out the full force of the theological significance attaching to accommodation, "The Magisterial Reformers developed a nuanced doctrine of 'accommodation' to enable them to think through how the God who is described as transcendent, personal and non-corporeal could be thought to speak in human words...From a Christian perspective, an omniscient God who accommodates Himself to talk in human languages introduces several new and important elements." Carson, The Gagging of God, p130.

[42] George, Theology of the Reformers, p324.

[43] "Since our weakness cannot reach His height, any description of God must be lowered to our capacity" Institutes, 1.17.13. See E.D. Willis, *Rhetoric and responsibilty in Calvin's Theology,* in A.J. McKelway & E.D. Willis, (eds), The Context of Contemporary Theology, Essays in Honour of Paul Lehmann, (Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1974), linking Calvin's use of accommodation to rhetoric, Calvin seeing revelation as 'God's persuasive accommodation'. For a way in which the application of the principle of accommodation might be understood in terms of analogy, see C.M. Ashley, John Calvin's Utilization of the principle of Accommodation and its Continuing Significance for an Understanding of Biblical Language., D.Th thesis, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1972, p67.

known by revelation, and God reveals Himself not as he is in Himself, but in forms adapted to man's capacity.[44]

These two ways of applying the principle of accommodation unite within the unfolding of the saving purposes of God:

In speaking of the Bible, Calvin extends the idea of accommodation beyond the mode to the actual content of revelation and argues that the very diction of Biblical language is often adapted to the finitude of man's mind. God does not merely condescend to human frailty by revealing Himself in the prophetic and apostolic word and by causing the Word to be written down in sacred books; He also makes His witnesses employ accommodated expressions. For example, God is represented anthropomorphically:[45]

The Christological centre of this activity is indicated by,

Calvin's belief in God's accommodation of His word to human weakness in every age was central to his understanding of Incarnation. Calvin believed with Irenaeus, "that the Father, Himself infinite, becomes finite in the Son, for he has accommodated himself to our little measure lest our minds be overwhelmed by the immmensity of His glory."[46]

On the role of the Holy Spirit, Calvin comments that

The Bible is the inspired Word of God revealed in human language and confirmed to the believer by the witness of the Holy Spirit.[47]

However, the role of the Spirit extends beyond this 'external' dimension,

The Holy Spirit accommodates to the language and mode of expression of the various authors. Accommodation could be appplied more broadly in terms of adaptation to the historically relevant forms of presentation of the authors of scripture.[48]

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[44] B. Gerrish, The Old Protestantism and the New, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), p175.
[45] Gerrish, The Old Protestantism, p175.
[46] W.J. Bouwsma, John Calvin, a Sixteenth Century Portrait, (Oxford: OUP, 1988), p125.
[47] Calvin's commentary on 2 Timothy, 3, 16 in George, Theology of the Reformers, p194.
[48] W. Pannenberg, Systematic Theology, (1988: ET: Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), p34.

It is possible to understand the primitive nature of Biblical 'science' in such a way as to make perfectly good sense rather than see it as a stumbling block to appreciating its essential truth.

> [In creation God] accommodates His power to human capacities, distributing "His work into six days that we might not find it irksome to occupy our whole life in contemplating it."[49]

Or again,

> Calvin's cosmology was geocentric. But it was geocentric because he accepted the established astronomical views of his day. Had he been confronted with convincing evidence for the heliocentric hypothesis there is no reason to assume that he would have found the evidence embarrassing. He considered it an act of accommodation when the Psalmist spoke of the sun as passing from one end of the sky to the other. The Psalmist's aim was to evoke thankfulness by pointing to what the eye sees.[50]

Our contention is that the biblical text, reflecting the accommodatory nature of the revelation of God within the context of an overarching Divine rhetoric, is capable of mediating its message in any and every historical situation, without having to be interpreted in ahistorical terms. So in the Institutes we have various examples of how Calvin understands God to have accommodated Himself to His human audience, and how Calvin accommodates himself to his particular audience.

> 'Moses, accommodating himself to the rudeness of common folk, mentions in the history of creation no other works of God than those which show themselves to our own eyes.' This statement is especially illuminating in that it portrays the accommodating Spirit of God working through the brilliantly accommodative rhetoric of a human being.[51]

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[49] George, Theology of the Reformers, p203, referring to Institutes, 1.14.2.
[50] Gerrish, The Old Protestantism, p176.
[51] Jones, Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety, p28.

Rhetoric shaped in such accommodatory fashion might appear limited in its application to the particular historical context. However, a text does not have to be divested of its rhetoric in order for its meaning to be discerned. This can be demonstrated by considering what we mean by the historical context. The context of any reader is defined in terms of space and time. There is no sense in speaking of an ahistorical context. It is not a case of interpreting a text ahistorically, but of making a text meaningful in any historical context. A text should be able to be understood whenever it is read, wherever it is read, regardless of who its reader is. Yet it can be argued that a text can be so structured that it can only be understood within a particular context. By divesting the biblical text of its rhetorical clothing one does not discover an otherwise hidden, ahistorical meaning. The fact that it is structured rhetorically allows it to be understood in any historical context regardless of its particular historical setting. Its received understanding depends upon the way its language is accommodated to its audience. The desired response of any and every reader is discerned according to the way in which the accommodatory language functions. It is not unreasonable to argue that the accommodatory language of the biblical text is such that its potential audience is limitless. However, the language of the biblical text may invite the conclusion that the ability to understand it is necessarily confined to an already predetermined audience. This invites a reconciling of the difficulty encountered earlier in respect of limited atonement and irresistible grace. The meaning of the biblical text may only be able to be understood by an 'elect'. Our primary concern is whether the Biblical text as written invites the interpretation that it contains a gracious self revelation of an existing God. We are not so much concerned with the audience to whom such an interpretation is available. This is illustrated by considering how Niesel considered Calvin's thought.[52] Jones concludes that Niesel was wrong because

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[52] W. Niesel, The Theology of John Calvin,[ET], (London: Westminster Press, 1956).

he failed to acknowledge the role of rhetoric in interpreting Calvin's texts. His error was to employ,

> An implicit assumption that the message the text speaks can be extracted from its rhetorical clothing and restated with a propositional clarity that captures the text's true meaning, its rhetorically unencumbered doctrinal truth. As a result, Niesel offers a reading of Calvin divorced from the type of dispositional knowledge of truth - truth that is rhetorically evoked - that Calvin intended his texts to elicit.[53]

Jones indicates how Calvin appreciated the way rhetoric and accommodation acted upon each other to provide a way of appreciating the contextual significance of any text.

> Calvin understood that rhetorical ornamentation rarely has universal applicability. It must always be carefully accommodated to the conventions of a particular audience. In this sense, history is linked to rhetoric and together they form the contextual terrain within which meaning occurs.[54]

D. Calvin's Appreciation of the Rhetorical Structure of Divine Discourse.

Calvin's understanding of theological discourse is described:-

> For Calvin, theological discourse is marked by a double purpose: it seeks to witness to the revelation of God in the Bible, and it seeks to do so in a language capable of moving the hearts, minds and wills of its audience towards ever deepening lives of faith.[55]

These purposes are inter-related.

> Theologians are required to write eloquently and to move their audiences to faith precisely because God's revelation, as spoken through the prophets and apostles, has as its own goal the creation of a faithful

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[53] Jones, Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety, p57.
[54] Jones, Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety, p57.
[55] Jones, Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety, p187.

> covenant between God and human persons. In other words the rhetoric of theology must be persuasive and hence accommodating because God's own Word is inherently persuasive and accommodating.[56]

For Calvin, revelatory speech prescribes the scope of what can be known of God. Speculation is to be rejected as a source of such knowledge.

> We cannot 'get behind' God's speaking. Revelation for Calvin is all to do with the accommodated materiality of God's enunciated Word in the Bible, creation, and Jesus Christ. How is this Divinely enunciated Word to be understood? According to Calvin, it is understood in terms of its ability to persuade, to build covenant, and to bestow the benefits of salvation.[57]

It is to be understood in terms of disposition.

E. Calvin's Legacy: Contra Cupitt.

For Calvin the 'truth of God's Word' was assumed. His concern was to understand the dispositional implications of the Divine revelation described in the biblical text. However, Calvin's agenda was similar to that of 'post-modern' theology:

> Like Calvin, these theologians find a purely propositional account of doctrine inadequate for describing the work that doctrines do; and again, like Calvin they avoid - or at least try and avoid- getting mired in questions concerning the truth status of theological claims about God.[58]

What is avoided is the 'truth status of theological claims about God'. Theology is not to do with the reality of God per se, although some post-modernist philosophers operate in terms of a non-realist theology. The debate need not

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[56] Jones, Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety, p187.
[57] Jones, Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety, p188. Hence,K. Braaten, "God is to be correlated with soteriology. Soteriology clarifies who God is, and who God is is expressed in soteriology. Remove the soteriological centre, and the doctrine of God is abstract and threatening." Our Naming of God, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), p90.
[58] Jones, Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety, p202.

preclude a similar agenda being pursued by realist theologians. It is not about whether or not God is real, it is about appreciating the way Christian theology functions. In the light of Calvin's approach we can respond to Cupitt's claim that realist Christian theology cannot survive in contemporary post-modern theology.

The biblical text can be understood as the Word of God, the Divine will and purpose understood in terms of its rhetoric. The rhetoric of the biblical text allows it to be interpreted in any age as its language is accommodated to any audience. The biblical text delineates the context of revelation; describing the historical context within which revelation was set forth; determining the way in which any subsequent revelation is to be appropriated. Therefore it is not unreasonable to contend that the biblical text is a 'communication' from God; from beyond the created order into its midst, understandable by those whose abilities to understand are otherwise limited by the constraints imposed by being bound into the created order. This is possible because the language is accommodative of its audience. Calvin stands between the medieval and the modern. He rejects the speculative theology of scholasticism in favour of an essential dynamism which comes from moving away from propositional theology. 'New Literary Criticism' rejects the sterility of modernity, providing an opportunity for texts to 'live' again. Within 'new literary criticism' is rhetorical criticism[59].

A number of connections can be made between the pre-modern Calvin and the post-modern era. We understand the biblical text as persuading one to to come to faith. It is constructed out of experiences from within the historical realm. It tells of lives of faith consequent upon encounters had within the reality of life events. It tells of how people came to faith in order that we too might come to faith. We

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[59] "When James Muilenburg proposed what he termed "Rhetorical Criticism," he inaugurated a new era in the reading of the Bible. Many following his lead take rhetoric to be the art of *composition* and seek in structure, verbal patterns, and stylistic devices what a text means and how its meaning is reinforced. Yet there are debates. Is "rhetoric" a matter of textual artistry or persuasive design and appeal? Should compositional analysis be beholden to the final form of a composite text? Does rhetorical criticism supplement or replace form criticism? How are conditions of origin relevant to a text's continuing power? Has artistic means displaced textual meaning? D. Patrick, in reviewing, P. Trible's, Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method and the Book of Jonah, in Interpretation, 51/1, January, 1997, p84.

are not to have faith in them, we are to have faith in God. Their intention is not that we encounter them but that we are encountered by the God who encountered them. We are to recognise the primacy of the dispositional. We are to relegate concern for the propositional, so that it is considered according to the constraining influence of a dispositional imperative. This is possible when proper account is taken of its rhetoric.[60] The rhetoric of the biblical text invites us to acknowledge that God is real. There is sufficient within the work of Calvin to indicate the direction in which we should go in order to deal with the challenge which Cupitt has set down.

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[60] As by G.Jones, Critical Theology, (London: Polity, 1995). Commenting in review, John Heywood Thomas remarks that, "here we see that the issue is really one of finding a way of speaking of transcendence in immanence - of how to do theology in a post-Kantian context...The contention that the themes of twentieth-century theology are structured and reveal a certain logic, viz. 'the engagement between mystery, event and rhetoric' is very suggestive...Also as rhetoric in the technical sense is something that plays a crucial part in the book so rhetoric in the popular sense is very characteristic of the book's style...the final stage of the argument then expounds the medium theology uses to expres its truth - rhetoric; and because rhetoric is understood as behaviour and not simply language the notion of the relation of faith to society is addressed." Reviews in Religion and Theology, 1995/3, p35-36. Jones makes the same point in reverse when quoting, albeit ironically, from J. Milbank's The Word made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997); "In the beginning was God. And God spoke God's Word, Jesus Christ: revelation. The Church worshipped the Word, in truth. Then came theologians: they messed everything up. because they persisted in trying to accommodate God's Word to society's words, 'the most puerile form of betrayal' " Reviews in Religion and Theology, 1997/2, p6.

Chapter 9

Interpreting the Biblical Text: A Contemporary Hermeneutic Methodology.

1. Introduction.

Interpreting the biblical text requires a strategy for discovering its meaning. Any contemporary hermeneutic methodology must take account of 'reader response criticism'. However, the term 'Reader-response criticism' is itself open to a variety of interpretations,

> Reader-response criticism stresses the incompleteness of the text until it is constructed (or deconstructed) by the reader. 'Conservative' reader-response critics note the way the text itself invites the reader to participate in the construal of its meaning; the text leaves blanks or indeterminancies so that reading becomes a kind of dot-to-dot exercise. They also observe that we read from within a tradition, that is, from within a clearly circumscribed set of social and cultural prejudices. Readers cannot help but read from this perspective or horizon. On this view, meaning is the product of the interaction between text and reader. "Radical" reader-response critics, on the other hand, tend to give the reader the initiative in putting questions to the text or simply in using the texts for their own aims and purposes; the text is simply an opportunity for the reader to pursue his/her own agenda. On this view the text is inactive and the reader is the producer of meaning. What distinguishes the two schools of reader-response criticism is that the radicals (usually hermeneutic non-realists) deny that interpretations are constrained by the text.[1]

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[1] Kevin J.Vanhoozer, Is there a meaning in this Text? The Bible, the Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge. , (Leicester: Apollos, 1998), p27-28.

Therefore, for the 'conservative' or the 'radical' critic the text is crucial. The spectrum of potential reader responses is established in terms of 'limiting/delimiting positions' within which reading takes place.[2] Traditionally, a text was 'read' to discover the meaning its author intended to be recovered. One cannot divest a text of everything its author intended it to convey.[3] The structure of a text may also help to ensure that the author's intention is accurately preserved, thereby ensuring that the range of potential reader responses is properly consistent with such intention.[4]

> Reading is a dangerous activity. It can change our perspective, stir our emotions and provoke us to action. In other words, reading elicits a response in the reader. This happens because the reception of literature is not passive but active and constructive. We try to make sense of the text. The text itself is impotent until we realise its potential meaning.[5]

However, we have already noted the controversial nature of any opinions reached in this area. Before pressing any conclusions as far as the biblical text is

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[2] This accords with our understanding of ultra realism and anti-realism: 'limiting/delimiting' positions within which epistemological inquiry might take place.

[3] See F. Watson's appraisal of the 'New paradigm for Biblical Interpretation'; a rejection of the three 'pillars' of the traditional approach; 'Literal Sense', 'Authorial Intention', 'Objective Interpretation'. The so-called post-modern shift is in danger of becoming a self-contradiction by imposing its own dogmatic solution to the problems raised by any hermeneutic enquiry. "However, these particular dogmas conflict with those dogmas held to be foundational to orthodox Christian faith and therefore in light of such conflict, certain inherent problems and implausibilities come to light....A Christian faith concerned to retain its own coherence cannot for a moment accept that the Biblical texts (individually and as a whole) lack a single determinate meaning, that their meanings are created by their readers, or that theological interpretations must see themselves as non-privileged participants in an open-ended, pluralistic conversation." F. Watson, Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical theology, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), p97. By taking postmodernism seriously; by acknowledging that instead of fixed points to which realities correspond or otherwise, fixed meanings with which words, texts etc are bound to comply, we can discover there are limiting positions within which objective correspondence and subjective coherence cooperate in generating a sense of meaningfulness, within which the intention of the author and the response of the reader - anticipated and real - can cooperate in manifesting a consistent hermeneutic strategy. The structure of the biblical text generates from its readers/hearers a belief in the reality of a self-existing God who has revealed His nature and purpose as described in the biblical text. Cupitt falls foul of Watson's charge of imposing post-modern dogma - non-realist theology - either because he does not appreciate the true nature of thoroughgoing postmodernism, or else because he fears its ultimate consequence.

[4] See G. Bray, 'The new literary criticism' under which heading he discusses 'author-centred' criticism, 'text-centred' criticism, and 'reader-centred' criticism. Biblical Interpretation, Past and Present, (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), p482-484.

[5]Bray, Biblical Interpretation, p578.

concerned, it is important to take note of the way in which reader response criticism developed within the wider context of the new literary criticism.

2. Reader-Response Criticism: Its development within 'New Literary Criticism'

Reader-Response Criticism can be described as follows,

> A poem (text) cannot be understood apart from its results. Its 'effects', psychological or otherwise, are essential to any accurate description of its meaning, since that meaning has no effective existence outside of its realization in the mind of the reader.[6]

The 'base-line' for reader response is the assertion that literature is text-centered. Literary meaning is contained by the words of the text. As such, the reader is persuaded to play the role by the language of the text. The text becomes a 'speaker' addressing its 'reader', yielding up the strategy employed by the author to position the 'reader' concerning the meaning/interpretation the author wishes the reader to accept/reject. The focus moves from the text and to the reader. Readers came to be categorized as real/actual; virtual/intended; ideal; critical. However, despite this detailed analysis of the nature of a potential readership, reading remained the discovering of what was already on the page. The reader remained,

> A flawed but reverential seeker after the 'truths', in this case the structures, preserved in literary art.[7]

Even though literary meaning was thought of as residing in the language of the text, it came to be argued that such meaning could not exist independently of its readers.

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[6] J.P.Tompkins,(ed), Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism, (John Hopkins U.P. Baltimore/London, 1980), pix

[7] Tompkins, pxiii

> Literary meaning is the function of a reader's response to a text and cannot be described accurately if that response is left out of the account.[8]

This effectively denied the priority of word/grammar patterns. The significant linguistic features of a text are those which consistently arrest the attention of its readership. Meaning unfolds and is best described in terms of predictability or otherwise, arousing expectations and satisfying/frustrating them. However, still the objectivity of the text is preserved. Reader response is evidence of meaning but it does not constitute it.

This assumption was challenged by Iser[9] who argued that the reader actively participates in the production of textual meaning. This does not mean that the text is thereby open to subjective falsification, rather the range of potential interpretations reflects the inexhaustibility of the text,

> The text's intentions may be manifold, they may even be infinite, but they are always present embryonically in the work itself, implied by it, circumscribed by it, and finally, traceable in it.[10]

The reader's activity fulfils what is already implicit in the structure of the text.

It was Fish[11] who confronted this particular 'structuralist' approach. He argued that readers actually contribute decisively to the creation of meaning. This requires a redefinition of meaning – not extracted from the text, rather an experience one has when reading the text, and of literature – not a fixed object of attention, rather a sequence of events unfolding in the reader's mind. Therefore, it is the reader's response that is the proper focus of critical attention because,

> The place where sense is made or not made is the reader's mind rather than the printed page or the space between the covers of a book.[12]

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[8] Tompkins, pxiii

[9] Regarded by Vanhoozer as a 'conservative' reader-response critic, Is There a meaning in this text?, p151-153.

[10] Tompkins, pxv

[11] Although not explicitly described as such, very much a 'radical' reader-response critic as far as Vanhoozer is concerned, Is There a meaning in this Text?, p24, 26, 28.

[12] Fish, quoted by Tompkins, pxvii

Again this does not produce an entirely anarchic approach. The reader can never be entirely divorced from the structure of the text. The linguistic system employed in the production of texts, and internalised by all its users demands that any reading of any text is somehow uniform. Just as production of texts is thereby constrained, so is the range and direction of any potential response. The text becomes subordinate to the literary conventions governing the appropriating of meaning via its structure. The primary task of the reader is not so much to discern the meaning of the text, but to understand how to discern meaning within a text. Such conventions possess no objective value. They correspond to public notions of acceptability or appropriateness in terms of interpretation of texts. Literary meaning is an institutional matter. What prescribes textual interpretation are the institutions which teach people to read according to the interpretive strategies which they impart.

Reader response can also be understood in terms of epistemology. Reading is part of the educative process. Individual subjective interpretation becomes a form of knowledge via a process of interrogation and negotiation between the text, the reader and the community of interpreters to which the reader belongs, Vanhoozer's 'conservatism'. This is in contrast to the 'radicalism' of Fish who regards the outcome of reading as existential; reader response as primarily an experiential reaction to reading the text according to the established conventions for literary understanding: conventions which in theory could demand that anybody be allowed to experience anything out of any text. The community of interpreters validates and authorizes any and every interpretation.[13]

The issue therefore is whether or not the structure of the text retains an ability to prescribe the mode of interpretation regardless of who the reader might be. Otherwise the reader takes priority, in spite of publicly acknowledged interpretive strategies applied regardless of the structure of any particular text. Is the

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[13] The most extreme understanding of Fish. See his, Is there a text in this class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities, (Cambridge, Ms: Harvard U.P. 1980)

outcome of reading epistemological or experiential? The biblical text invites the conclusion that the outcome of reading it is both epistemological and experiential.[14] It invites a particular mode of response, but because its language is accommodative of its readers, it invites that particular mode of response regardless of any existing reader-oriented interpretive strategies. We concur with Vanhoozer; "My thesis is that in reading we encounter an other that calls us to respond."[15]

3. Reader Response Criticism: A Post-Structuralist Perspective?

Post-structuralism is what it isn't![16] It emerges out of, is in reaction to, and yet is part of structuralism.[17] Post-structuralist critiques were produced before the term became part of an accepted vocabulary.[18] It is best referred to as an extending of structuralism, itself defined as,

> [the] attempt to extend the methodological principles of Ferdinand de Sassure, the father of modern linguistics, to a broad range of academic disciplines.[19]

Although directly emerging out of structuralism, Post-structuralism also reacted against it.

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[14] For a general discussion on the development of a text-oriented approach to interpreting the Bible see, D.J.A. Clines, The Bible in the Modern World, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

[15] Is There a Meaning in this Text? p368. Vanhoozer's overall thesis can be described as hermeneutic realism.

[16]Hence, Derrida's seminal work in this field, *'La Differance'* - a lecture delivered at The Sorbonne, 1968. See *"Differance",* in J. Derrida, Margins of Philosophy, [trans. Alan Bass], (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

[17]"A general intellectual movement...The common features of structuralist positions is the belief that phenomena of human life are not intelligible except through their interrelations. These relations constitute a structure, and behind local variations in the surface phenomena there are constant laws of abstract structure." Blackburn, Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, p364-365. For how structuralism has come to influence our understanding of the meaning of the Biblical text, see, R. Jacobson, *The Structuralists and the Bible,* in D. Mckim, (ed.), A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p280-296.

[18]The relationship between Structuralism and Post - Structuralism appears to be as hard to define as the one between Modernism and Post - Modernism. Moore comments that "Post -Structuralism can justly be said to have been implicit in Structuralism from the latter's inception. Post Structuralism, p2.

[19] Moore, Post Structuralism, p2.

> Sassure's structural linguistics, pressed to their logical conclusion, quickly became something that Sassure himself could not have foreseen: a general philosophy of language with disturbing ramifications for philosophy in general, not to mention theology, as well as literary criticism and numerous other fields, Biblical studies included.[20]

We consider Post-structuralism in terms of 'deconstructive literary criticism',

> An attempt to show that literary, critical and philosophical arguments are invariably destabilised by the figures and tropes that they necessarily employ.[21]

These developments are intertwined with reader response criticism,

> "Is reader response criticism a form of Post-structuralism? Not usually, although there may be an overlap of interests."[22] ..."Reader response criticism proved to be a slippery slope that eventually plunged me into Post-structuralism."[23]...Reader response criticism enacts and re-enacts the collapse of 'critical' 'metalanguage' - the pretensions of one form of language (criticism) to pronounce upon another form of language (literature) from a position safely outside or above it...the impossibility of 'metalanguage' is a recurrent Post-structuralist theme.[24]

The conclusions reached by deconstructive literary theory can appear to be the inevitable consequence of the politics of postmodernity, generating an 'end user theory of interpretation'[25] characterised by,

> Theory driven scholars determined to read themselves into the text and to construct reading strategies in the discipline of biblical studies that would

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[20] Moore, p2.
[21] Moore, p129.
[22] Moore, p132.
[23] Moore, p5.
[24] Moore, p6.
[25] Clines, p91. Such a theory embraces a goal oriented hermeneutic, a market place philosophy of interpretation, the discipline of comparative interpretation, all based on the indeterminacy of meaning and the authority of the interpreting community, Vanhoozer's 'radical' critic.

reflect the point of view of their own reader response approaches to the biblical text. [26]

However, if the text is structured rhetorically and if its language is accommodative of its readers, our argument is that the meaning that is 'read' out of the text may coincide with the meaning intended to be 'read' out of it. It is entirely reasonable to describe this meaning in terms of reader response because the intention of the text is to persuade the reader of the significance of the meaning intended to be discovered by any reader. The biblical text is able to withstand the challenge of deconstructive literary criticism because its structure defies deconstruction.[27]

4. Reader Response and Redaction Criticism: The Canon of Scripture

The significance of structure as far as the biblical text is concerned requires consideration of Redaction Criticism. "The redaction critic is a reader-response critic who has yet to come out of the closet".[28] The biblical text is a collection of texts. In its finished form it comprises constituent parts brought together to constitute the whole. In reading it, we must take account of how it came to be

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[26] R.P. Carroll, *Post-structuralist approaches to New Historicism and Postmodernism,* in J.Barton, (ed), Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), p50
He develops his thesis regarding the political dimension thus, "Some forms of post-modern approach to biblical readings would insist on an egalitarian relationship between competing interpretations whereby everybody's point of view must be respected and acknowledged as equal to everybody else's point of view…Like all utopias, this utopia may find itself deconstructed by advancing fundamentalist revivalisms which will insist on empowering some readings over others." p61-62.

[27] For many. Cupitt included, deconstruction is assumed in any discussion of contemporary philosophy. This is not necessarily so. For a critique of deconstruction, see S.Fowl, Engaging Scripture, p40-56.

[28] Moore, p6. Redaction criticism provides a valuable insight into the way 'reader-response' criticism comes to assert itself. In terms of the 'reader' we have both the 'actual' and the 'ideal' - some refer to the 'implied' reader. Likewise as regards the author; there is the 'actual' but there is also the 'ideal' or the 'implied' author. The task of the redaction critic is to discern the intention of the 'ideal' author - the redactor - who has taken individual 'texts' produced by 'actual' authors in order to generate an 'ideal' text. Here again, there is the creative tension generated between the intention of the actual authors of the individual textual units, and the intention of the redactor as he seeks to idealise the intention present in the texts of several actual authors. Post structuralist approaches do not invalidate 'redactionesque' strategies, but they do council caution as to where the 'weight' of influence might lie as between the individual textual units, and the whole text. As far as Biblical studies is concerned, this anticipates the range of issues which have grown up around 'Canonical Criticism'.

structured. This demands an appreciation of the theological significance that attaches to the canon - Christian Scripture. We have to appreciate how the constituent parts came to comprise the whole in order that the meaning of the constituent parts might be discovered in terms of the meaning of the text as a whole. This emerges out of reading the constituent parts; they each suggest that they be read within the wider canonical context.[29] Hence canonical criticism, best expressed in the works of Brevard Childs.[30] The content of any biblical passage cannot be described in purely linear, or consecutive terms. The 'canonical' context is present, potentially, in every actual passage: actualised by the 'closing of the canon'.[31]The issue is not, what constitutes the 'canon', but the realisation that any hermeneutic methodology applied to the biblical text must acknowledge it as Christian Scripture. Exegetical precision is not a necessary prerequisite for theological enquiry so much as a hermeneutic derived from a doctrine of God in terms of revelation. Reviewing a book by Charles Scalise, Vanhoozer addresses the issue at the heart of our engagement with Cupitt:

> Child's approach to scripture enables Scalise to recover an authoritative word for the Church; it thus responds to the contemporary crisis with regard to theological method without entering into metaphysical and epistemological debates about the nature, possibility and locus of Divine revelation. Childs, like Wittgenstein, avoids the pitfalls of realism and

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[29] Hence Fowl's comment, "The authority then, is not so much an invariant property of the biblical texts, as a way of ordering a set of textual relationships." Engaging Scripture, p6.

[30] "For him [Childs], a theologically based interpretation of the Bible must begin with the final form of the text and relate its findings to the entire canon. Childs is mainly concerned with how a passage functions within its canonical context, though it is not altogether clear how he defines that. Which came first, the passage or the context? There would appear to be a circular argument here from which it is impossible to escape." Bray, Biblical Interpretation, p482.

[31] "Given the development of structuralism and deconstruction in literary criticism, the renewed interest in the final form of the text, and the growth of rhetorical criticism, Childs' project is potentially important. It resists the assumption that what historical criticism has to say is all that there is to say, and opens the door to participation by a much wider group of readers in the act of interpretation." Coggins & Houlden, Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation, p106. Or consider the following, "Scripture preserved and interpreted by the Christian community and actualised in personal religious experience, is the primary means in which the authority of God in Christ is mediated to Christians today." Charles J. Scalise, Hermeneutics as Theological Prologomena, (Macon, Georgia: Mercer Uni. Press, 1995), p3

idealism with regard to theological language and instead concentrates on the canon as the set of Christian language-games that provide the rules for subsequent Christian language and practice. The canon is the grammar for the language game of theology that is rooted in the Christian form of life.[32]

Contra Cupitt, such an understanding of the role of the canon of scripture directly engages with the metaphysical and epistemological 'pit-falls' referred to by demanding that they be got over in terms of realist theology. An appreciation of the biblical text in terms of its narrative provides a necessary consistency regarding the interpretation of its overall meaning and the establishing of its ultimate context, discoverable only when considered from its canonical perspective.

Narrative is useful because it provides a way of construing the canon as a whole which integrates scripture's first order language and theology's second order redescription. A central literary genre in scripture can be integrated with an organising theological image. Narrative emphasises the interacting of circumstance and character, incident and identity in an ordered, chronological sequence, Events not only follow on successively, they are configured into a coherent whole which organises them all. We have created for us a sense of expectancy as successive events move us towards an anticipated conclusion. It all makes sense from the perspective of the end.[33]

Having identified its constituent parts, and having identified its final form, we are able to read it as a text structured to perform the rhetorical function its author intended. This is reflected consistently throughout both the biblical text as a whole, and its constituent parts, because the parts demand by their very

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[32] Reviews in Religion & Theology, (SCM), Feb. '97, 1997/1, p32.
[33] R. Thiemann, Revelation and Theology; Revelation as Narrated Promise, (New York: University of Notre dame Press, 1985), p84-85

structure to be understood, not in isolation, but from the perspective of the text as a whole. Not defined according to any presupposed, extra-textual position, but established as a result of direct hermeneutic engagement with it.

5. A Particular Approach to Reader Response Criticism: Narrative Criticism.

Narrative criticism is one response to the challenge of the deconstructive literary critic, although this is not to say that the emphasising of the narrative dimension of texts is a recent phenomenon within hermeneutics.[34] However, defining narrative criticism is not easy.

> What if narrative criticism was actually a retreat from the critical rigour of historical scholarship? What if its not inconsiderable success was due to a widespread weariness with 'the unrest and difficulty for Christian piety' caused by centuries of historical criticism?[35]

Moore answers his own question by referring to Mark Allan Powell.[36]

> In the final chapter of his book, Powell grapples with an interesting question, 'What effect will the use of this method, [narrative criticism], have on the wider task of interpreting Scripture for the life of the Church?' A highly salubrious effect according to Powell. Narrative criticism, on his account, turns out to be surprisingly compatible with the 'interests of believing communities'. It is 'especially attractive to those who have been

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[34] Aristotle in his 'Poetics' stressed the significance of the narrative plot drawing together isolated actions into an action-oriented purposive whole which lends the text coherence and intelligibility for its audience. "In Biblical studies the significance of Aristotle's work regained recognition only with the advent of narrative theory and reader-response criticism in Biblical hermeneutics." A.Thiselton, *Biblical Studies, Theological Hermeneutics* in Barton (ed), Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation, p96. Cupitt discusses the role of narrative within the biblical text in WS, ch.5, *Theological Stories.* He describes such stories as being written in prose fiction, and therefore entirely humanised. He admits that God could be thought of as entering 'the purely humanist world of prose fiction', either as being off-stage, manipulating events in a hidden way; as an indirect/negative presence as related through religious experience, or as one who intervenes as a character in the story. Even if we accept Cupitt's description of the Biblical narrative as fictional as opposed to historical, it is entirely reasonable to assert the reality of God being revealed in the narrative in each of the ways he denies is possible. p113.

[35] Moore, p113.

[36] M. A. Powell, What is Narrative Criticism?, [London: SPCK, 1993].

uncomfortable with the challenges posed by historical criticism.' Particularly striking for me [Moore] is the confessional twist that Powell manages to give to two of narrative criticism's salient traits. First, he has this to say of narrative criticism's trademark preoccupation with the 'final form' of the Biblical text; 'By focusing on the finished form of the text, narrative criticism seeks to interpret Scripture at its canonical level; the text that is considered to be identical with that which believing communities identify as authoritative for their faith and practice.' Powell also gives a theological twist to the preoccupation with the role of the reader that is characteristic both of narrative criticism and reader response criticism. He notes, 'the certainty of faith with which the Gospel narratives appear to have been written and with which they obviously expect to be read.' And he adds: 'By interpreting texts from the point of view of their own implied readers, narrative criticism offers exegesis that is inevitably from a faith perspective.[37]

Moore continues,

> At this point, Post-structuralism begins to back away nervously from narrative criticism alarmed at the evangelical glint that has apparently appeared in its eye.[38]

The biblical text records the experiences of believers. It originated within existing believing communities, and was structured for the purpose of describing the specific events which gave rise to the believing communities in order to persuade others to join them. The justification for what is recorded in the biblical text is that the experiencing of the events described serve as a basis for what is believed. Regarding the 'confessional twist' which Powell applies to narrative criticism; the biblical text in its canonical form is that which believing communities acknowledge as authoritative. Within the biblical text is the historical, experiential

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[37] Moore, p115-116.
[38] Moore, p116.

basis for what is believed and articulated by a believing community that others might believe. An examination of the biblical text reveals accounts of what coming to believe means, how one comes to believe, what it means to be a believer. It contains all that anyone need know concerning belief, - coming to believe, the consequences of believing, the communicating of what one believes. What it is obvious in reading is,

> The certainty of faith with which the Gospel narratives appear to have been written and with which they obviously expect to be read.[39]

Certainty of faith is at the heart of the narrative. Post-Structuralist critics might recoil from this, nevertheless it is a reasonable conclusion to draw from investigating the meaning of the biblical text. Moore suggests that what narrative criticism is 'bound' to produce is nothing more than a superficial, fundamentalist understanding of the meaning of the text. He asks, "What if the [biblical] text in question were ethically flawed?"[40]? If the text is accepted as normative – as scripture - for determining such matters, how can it be ethically flawed unless judged to be so according to some external standard to which it is subordinate? If regarded as 'flawed', one simply refuses to believe its message. What if it [the text] was misogynistic?[41] Powell demonstrates how narrative criticism might help to resolve the issue,

> Passages 'that would otherwise be difficult for members of believing communities to accept' [can be salvaged] by 'interpreting them in terms of their intended literary effect rather than their apparent historical reference.[42]

In this context 'reader-response criticism' has a contribution to make within narrative criticism. The biblical text is not just the telling of a story or stories, it is

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[39] Moore, p115.
[40] Moore, p116.
[41] See, F.Watson, Text, Church and World, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), section 3, p155 - 202 with reference to misogyny in regard to reading the biblical text.
[42] Moore, p116, n11.

an invitation to become part of an unfolding story. Its structure lends itself to such an interpretation. Its historical reference, crucial in determining that to which a response is demanded has itself to be understood in such terms.[43] The way it elicits response from the reader is the key.

6. Contra Cupitt: A Critical Application of Structuralist Insights to the Interpreting of the Biblical Texts.

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We now consider how our particular structuralist perspective might provide a context for rebutting Cupitt's argument concerning the way the word 'God' and the words 'about God' should be understood. Cupitt's assertion that Christianity expressed in terms of realist theology is necessarily sterile because it clings to the notion of an existing God can be challenged by looking at what is declared to be redundant - which 'God is dead?'

> The greatest recent event - that 'God is dead', that belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable - is already beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe...the event itself is far too great, too distant, too remote from the multitude's capacity for comprehension even for the tidings of it to be thought of as having arrived yet. Much less may one suppose that many people know as yet what this event really means[44]

Since Nietzsche's writing those words, much has been said concerning the 'event' of which he wrote. Many have a sense of what he 'really meant'.

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[43] "The proposal, however, is to set out a doctrine of revelation according to the notion of 'narrated promise'..."All scripture should be divided into these two chief doctrines, the law and the promises. In some places it presents the law. In others it presents the promise of Christ; this it does either when it promises that the Messiah will come and promises forgiveness of sins, justification, and eternal life for His sake, or when in the New Testament the Christ who comes promises forgiveness of sins, justification and eternal life" P. Melancthon, The Apology to the Augsburg Confession, Article IV. In the act of promising is bestowed the blessing that is promised. It is the promiser who is the giver. Promise is a synonym for Gospel." R. Thiemann, Revelation and Theology, p97.

[44] F. Nietzsche, The Gay Science, Quoted in Ingraffia, Post-modern Theory, p19.

Post-modern thought has exposed two illusions of modernity: the unreality of the notion of presence in modernity's concept of present time and the unreality of the modern subject's self-understanding as grounded in itself...Modernity, since Descartes, longs to build for itself its own foundations in a consciousness deceptively pure and an identity deceptively secure. As the postmoderns make clear, however, the modern self, unfortunately for its foundationalist pretensions must also use language. And the very self-deconstructing, nongrounding play of the signifiers in all language will assure that no signified - especially the great modern signified, the modern subject - will ever find the pure identity, the clear and distinct self-presence it seeks or the totality it grasps at. That self-grounding, self-present modern subject is dead; killed by its own pretensions to grounding all reality in itself. Thanks to the postmoderns, that subject should be unmourned by all.[45]

Realist theology described in terms of speculative metaphysics may well be sterile. This sterility is due to the way it is expressed. The post-structuralist seeks to establish the moribund nature of rationalist 'theology'. One 'positive' outcome of this may be the ridding of the theological landscape of the dichotomy between 'conservative' and 'liberal' theologies; these relative positions being better understood in terms of 'realist' and 'non-realist' theologies. The delimiting edges of the spectrum of theological opinion are better defined in such terms.[46]

It can also be argued that the poststructuralist fails to acknowledge the plausibility of realist theology because he has not appreciated that his work is

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[45] D. Tracy, On Naming the Present: God, Hermeneutics and the Church, (New York: Orbis, 1994), p15.

[46] As C. Braaten points out, "It is not a Christian virtue to rejoice when someone is getting killed, but the announcement of the 'death of God' was greeted in some Christian circles with joy and thanksgiving. The irony is that the closer a particular theology stuck to the central place of Christ in the Christian symbol system, the easier it was to bid adieu to the nontrinitarian God-construct of post-Enlightenment theism....The 'death of God' theology of the 1960s may be seen as a delayed reaction, on American soil, to the dissolution of theism...all bellowing out the death of God in a language that betrayed their Barthian accent, but they were unable to preserve the integrity of the language for faith for lack of an adequate conceptual framework provided by the Trinitarian framework." *The problem of God-Language today,* in C. Braaten, (ed.), Our Naming of God: Problems and Prospects of God-Talk Today, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), p17.

directed at one particular expression of it.[47] Ingraffia constructs his thesis in terms of a consideration of the ways in which Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida each describe realist theology established via metaphysical speculation as a fiction which in the post-structuralist era even as a fiction is now redundant. Each seeks to deconstruct the ontotheological character of metaphysics by overcoming the founding metaphysical dualisms of Western thought.[48] However, none gives sufficient attention to Judaeo-Christian thought as it was before it allegedly became synthesised with Greek rationalism. This error is compounded by failing to disentangle its essential message from the cumulative effect of its being invaded by Classical Greek thought, medieval scholasticism and post-enlightenment modernism. Hence our emphasis on the rhetorical – classical, renaissance and post-modern - as a way of countering these trends.

Central to the argument is the identification of an appropriate hermeneutic methodology; illustrated by considering how Ingraffia engages with Derrida.[49] As such, we engage with Derrida secondarily.[50] Whilst any interpretation of Derrida's ideas is controversial, it is sufficient for our purpose to work with one particular interpretation, that of Ingraffia. Whether his interpretation of Derrida is accurate or appropriate is beyond the scope of our enquiry. Our concern is with the line of argument Ingraffia employs. Ingraffia asserts that Derrida's engagement with

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[47] Alongside the post-modern methodology we are wanting to espouse, we need to acknowledge approaches described in terms of 'secular positivism' and 'religious fundamentalism' - what has been termed 'antimodernity', rather than 'postmodernity'. See Tracy, On Naming the Present, p12-15. However, we should be cautious of Tracy's use of terms as he goes on to speak of a non-fundamentalist version of anti-modernity which he equates with Barthian neo-conservatism; - "the new Barthianism of the Yale school", (p13). Post-modern insights can provide a framework within which a 'Barthian' theological perspective is able to flourish. See also, Johnson, The Mystery of God.

[48] Ingraffia, Post-modern theory, p 7-14.

[49] Within the field of literary criticism, generally, deconstructionism has been described as, "designates a theory or practice of reading which claims to 'subvert' or 'undermine' the assumption that the system of language provides grounds that are adequate to establish the boundaries, the coherence of unity, and the determinate meanings of a text." M.H. Abrams, A Glossary of literary Terms, (Fort Worth, Texas: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993), p123.

[50] For an introduction to Derrida's controlling ideas, see W.S. Johnson, The Mystery of God: Karl Barth and the Post-modern Foundations of Theology, (Louisville, Kentucky: W/JKP, 1997), p21-26. For those wishing to investigate these further, Johnson directs his readers to W. Lowe, Theology and Difference: The Wound of Reason, (Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1993). The primary 'source-book' which Johnson utilises as far as Derrida is concerned is J.Derrida, Writing and Difference, ([A.Bass, trans.], Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978).

'Logocentrism' is actually with the human 'logos' of classical and modern rationalism, not the Divine Logos expounded in the biblical text.[51] (Logocentrism)..."The term employed by Derrida to characterise any signifying system governed by the self-presence of meaning."[52] Ingraffia understands Derrida's project to be focused on deconstructing any notion of objective meaning or reality – 'the metaphysics of presence', so-called, challenging not just the existence of objective realities, but also the argument that to understand meaning properly it is necessary to import a 'transcendental signified,'

> Derridean shorthand for any concept thought to transcend interpretation or signification in such a way as to ground, orient or stabilise them (God, essence, identity, the author's intention, etc). More generally, it would be any order of meaning assumed to be self-evident, self-identical, originary, final or foundationary.[53]

This recreates a metaphysical dualism, albeit a linguistic one.[54]

> A dualism as between a consideration of language in terms of it being a phenomenon founded on a universal sense of transcendent meaning - *Sprachphilosophie* - and a consideration of the immediate immanent communicative power of discourse - *Redephilosophie*.[55]

Derrida's criticism of the notion of a 'transcendental signified' is not limited to the linguistic realm; he takes issue with Husserl's[56] suggestion that the

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[51] Ingraffia, Post-modern theory, p213. The primary texts which Ingraffia employs are listed at p272 of Post-modern Theory.

[52] Moore, Post Structuralism, p130. Moore is quoting B. Johnson, A World of Difference, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1983).

[53] Moore, p132-133. There are parallels between arguing for the existence of God by an 'ontological argument' and Kant's criticism of such an argument vis-à-vis existence; over against his introduction of the notion of the 'categorical imperative'. The question is whether any form of 'realism' is appropriate, not only in theology, but also in ethics. It might also be compared to Wittgenstein's understanding of the role of 'religious language'.

[54] Ingraffia, Post-modern theory, p217.

[55] L. Ayres, re G.Ward, Barth, Derrida, and the Language of Theology, pt 1, *Logocentrism*, in Reviews in Religion and Theology, 1995/4, p17. While Derrida (and Cupitt) would conclude that to supplant the former with the latter is sufficient to jettison the need for advocating the existence of God, our argument is that the existence of God becomes a far more formidable proposition when considered in terms of the latter than in terms of the former!

[56] Ingraffia, Post-modern Theory, p217. See Derrida's Positions, ([A.Bass trans] Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1972). As far as Husserl, 1859-1938, is concerned, "this principal founder of

'transcendental signified' can be understood as a 'spiritual ideality'. Derrida's argument is that the dualism so created is the same as between 'signifying' and 'signified', put forward by Heidegger[57] due to his reluctance to deny the possibility of the objectivity of 'Being'. Heidegger wondered whether the meaning of 'Being' might be determined metaphysically, in terms of 'presence'.[58] This allowed Derrida to deconstruct 'Being' by arguing that 'différance' is "older than 'Being' itself"[59] 'Différance' can never be understood in terms of a transcendental signified. Alongside this, Derrida endeavours to deconstruct any notion of the 'self-presence of consciousness'. In so doing he understands himself to be deconstructing the 'logos'.

> That the logos is first imprinted and that the imprint is the writing resource of language, signifies, to be sure that the logos is not a creative activity, the continuous full element of the divine word, etc.[60]

Derrida asserts that "language has started without us, in us and before us. This is what theology calls God."[61] Derrida also confronts those who respond by making language 'God'; - "The death of God is the birth of the word."[62] - and those for whom deconstruction is "the death of God put into writing"[63]

> If the movement of this reappropriation of deconstruction by theology appears in fact irrepressible, its ultimate failure is no less necessary.[64]

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phenomenology ...eventually abandoned his attempt to keep both a subjective and a naturalistic approach to knowledge together, abandoning the naturalism in favour of a kind of transcendental idealism."Blackburn (ed), Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy , p181.

[57] "Even Heidegger would reinstate rather than destroy the instance of the logos and of the truth of being as 'primum signatum', the 'transcendental signified." J.Derrida, Of Grammatology, in Ingraffia, Post-modern theory, p218. The text used by Ingraffia is that of G. Chakravorty [trans], (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1976).

[58] "But it is Heidegger who more than any other thinker opens up the possibility of a deconstruction of the transcendental signified. In repeating metaphysics as the question of Being, Heidigger opens up the possibility of questioning the metaphysical determination of Being, the truth of being, as presence." Ingraffia, Post-modern theory, p218.

[59] Ingraffia, p218.

[60] J. Derrida, Of Grammatology, in Ingraffia, p220.

[61] In Ingraffia, p223.

[62] Mark C. Taylor, *Text as Victim,* in T. J. Altizer, (ed.), Deconstruction and Theology, (New York: Crossroad, 1982), p73. Ingraffia, p224.

[63] C.A. Raschke, *The Deconstruction of God,* in Altizer (ed.), Deconstruction and Theology, p3. Ingraffia, p224.

[64] Ingraffia, p224.

Not even language as language is an acceptable way of talking about the 'transcendental', the 'logos'. – but again, what logos?

> But is there not a leap here, a 'leap of unfaith' which jumps from the deconstruction of the human consciousness, whether it be transcendental or not, to the claims of undoing 'the divine word?[65]

For Derrida, the 'divine logos' is the way ontotheology satisfies its desire for presence. It can be argued that Derrida merely deconstructs the 'human logos'..."the name of God as it is pronounced in classical rationalism."[66]Derrida assumes that the Biblical Logos is illustrative of logos as found in rationalist/idealist philosophy.[67] As such, the biblical Logos has been undermined by modernist metaphysics, content to employ 'god' as a grounding for "the operation of an independent and autonomous ego."[68] However, it can be argued that far from being illustrative of a construct of philosophy, the Logos described in the biblical text reveals a God completely different from this man-made god.

> The God revealed in the Bible does not make possible, but rather makes impossible, an absolutely pure and absolutely self-present self-knowledge. The God of the Bible destroys humanity's pretensions to a realm and life of one's 'own' and labels any attempt to claim one's life as one's own, sin. From Descartes to Hegel, rationalist philosophers worked to replace the god of the Bible with the god of ontotheology, a god which is only 'that which makes possible an absolutely pure and absolutely self-present self-knowledge.[69]

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[65] Ingraffia, p220.

[66] J. Derrida, Of Grammatology, p71. Ingraffia, p221.

[67] "Thus, within this epoch reading and writing, the production or interpretation of signs, the text in general as a fabric of signs allow themselves to be confined within secondariness. They are preceded by a truth, or a meaning already constituted by and within the element of the logos. Even when the thing, the 'referent', is not immediately related to the logos of creator God, where it began by being spoken/thought sense, the signified has at any rate an immediate relationship with the logos in general." J. Derrida, Of Grammatology, p14-15. Ingraffia, p221.

[68] Ingraffia, p221.

[69] Ingraffia, p222.

There is much to be gleaned from considering the apparently 'ungodly' activity of critics such as Derrida when endeavouring to free God from such anthropocentric concentration. Derrida may be wrong in seeing the restricted use made of theological language within the world of rationalist ideas as illustrative of the usefulness of theological language per se; however, those who are critical of the methodology because it interprets the word 'god' as illustrative rather than definitive do well to realise the potential application of such insights in a definitive case.[70] The way a text is read is analogous to the way we understand meaning. Our perception of meaning dictates the way we read. Post-structuralism might have liberated God from the rationalist philosophy of the modern period; it might also have set free texts otherwise constrained by the critical methods symptomatic of such a philosophy.[71]There is no reason why a text about an existing God should not be read meaningfully in the same way that the reality of an existing God is able to be affirmed. Our contention is that within the current intellectual climate, the affirmation of the reality of an existing God may depend on how it is understood in the context of the biblical text, because the biblical text records the revelation of an existing God given in order that anyone who reads it will realise how any revelation of God is to be understood. The biblical text is both illustrative and definitive regarding the way God is understood. Likewise language is both illustrative and definitive regarding the way meaning is to be

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[70] "Derrida's différance, the thought of the trace, does not take the place of God, but rather excludes God and anything else that would take His place. His thought is the denial of any God, and any Son of God, of any thought of the logos, including the Logos of John's prologue. But the work of deconstruction only breaks the false logos of rationalism. In breaking the Enlightenment faith in reason, of our concept of truth as residing as self-presence, as our own, Derrida can be useful for Christian thinkers. But Derrida takes apart only the Logocentrism of rationalism and idealism and yet claims to have deconstructed the thought of any presence before or outside of semiological difference." Ingraffia, p224.

[71] "His [Derrida's] examination of discourse *both* challenges representative models of communication *and* also challenges the linguistic idealism, indeed the relativism, with which he has been charged. Thus if Derrida's analysis of discourse rescues the philosophy of language (and the theological realisms argued for on the basis of such a philosophy) from the scientism which holds sway [in Braithwaite and Soskice], it does not allow us to abandon ourselves to the nihilistic free for all which provides the starting point for much post-modern atheology. As he himself acknowledges, in one of his most clear discussions of *differance*, what is pointed to is not the indeterminacy of meaning, but any finalised decidability." G. Ward, *Theological Materialism,* in C. Crowder, (ed.), God and Reality: Essays on Christian Non-Realism, (London: Mowbray, 1997), p156-157; pointing to Derrida's, Limited Inc., as quoted on p157.

understood. This does not deify language. It confirms the realm of engagement within which an existing God encounters humankind as the linguistic realm. A post-structuralist approach to the biblical text is not bound, necessarily, to deny the claim that it is a record of Divine activity. Ironically, given that Cupitt's plea is for an internalisation of the religious requirement, such an internalisation has produced the very Christianity which Cupitt wishes to see deconstructed. This is the confronting from within of the vertical transcendence by the immanence of postmodernism, what Milbank describes as self-sufficient nature-in-progress which he traces from Spinoza's 'Deus natura', through Derrida's 'Différance' to Cupitt's 'weak metaphysics'. Milbank argues that the 'différance' within the process is upheld by an ultimate 'indifférance', a whole which transcends the parts, but which is not other than them, the absolute never other than contingent, 'difference' sustained by a fixed dualism. Realist theology suggests a differentiated dualism, a transcendence greater than the whole, which replenishes the contingent, allowing the world to be constantly made new.[72] Biblical theology can be disengaged from ontotheology since the biblical text speaks of the prevenient revelation of God; this is accommodated to humankind through the condescension of Incarnation, expressed in the language of the biblical text.

7. Contra Poststructuralist Excesses: In Defence of Realist Theology.

Post-structuralism is assumed to argue against realist theology; therefore realist theology seeks to argue against post-structuralism. One such way is through

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[72] J. Milbank, *Problematizing the Secular,* in P.Berry & A. Wernick (eds.), Shadow of Spirit: Postmodernism and Religion, (London: Routledge, 1992), p30-45. This is that 'which would not go away' as far as Cupitt was concerned, hence the need for religion as described in TLOG, albeit internalised; and the re-emergence of 'weak metaphysics' in After All. What Cupitt is not prepared to concede is that internalisation can be understood in terms of Incarnational religion. Such a view is not itself necessary, but a voluntary choosing so to believe (or not believe). Post-modern philosophy demands that choice be allowed to be real choice.

'Negative theology'[73] - said by some to be capable of resisting deconstruction and itself able to be understood as a form of deconstruction. Ingraffia uses Derrida to provide a critical evaluation of negative theology,

> Negative movement of the discourse on God is only a phase of ontotheology...[negative theology] seems to exceed the alternative of a theism or an atheism, since it does not argue about the existence of God who is considered 'beyond' being or even 'without' being. Negative theology nevertheless remains tied to an ontotheology in an essential way, since it seems to reserve beyond all positive predication, beyond all negation, even beyond Being, some hyperessentiality, a being beyond Being.[74]

This assessment of negative theology also provides a criticism of Cupitt's view that negative theology exposes the illusory nature of an existing God. The development of negative theology provides overwhelming evidence that Derrida's conclusion is entirely accurate. Its history shows it to be more in tune with an ontotheological perspective than with Biblical theology. Questions concerning the nature of God - which prompted the via negativa - only began to be raised when Greek thought started to influence Christian theology. Its attempt to divorce God from Being appears to be grounded in Platonic or neoPlatonic conceptuality. Such an approach subordinates any notion of Divinely initiated self-revelation. It also collapses the distinction between God and humanity, causing one to conclude, "I am as God."[75] As such it is vulnerable to the twin threats of

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[73] We encountered this approach when considering Cupitt's argument that true religion demands the jettisoning of any belief in an objectively real God. Far from establishing the validity of Cupitt's views, it was understood as providing a more 'authentic' way of defending truth claims made in respect of such a God. In this context we are denying the claim that 'negative theology' can so sustain such truth claims. This is not a contradiction, because our argument is that 'negative theology' cannot be used to sustain an argument for establishing the existence of an objectively real God according to philosophical methodology. We agree with Cupitt that 'negative theology' does expose the 'unreality' of the existence of a God so established; where we disagree is with his conclusion that therefore there is no God. We wish to assert that there is another method by which the reality of the existence of such a God can be so established.

[74] In Ingraffia, Post-modern theory, p226. In similar vein we have Tillich's notion of the 'God beyond God' – beyond the reach of literal language and metaphysical concepts.

[75] Ingraffia, p227.

pantheism and gnosticism; promoting an immaterial 'vision' of God. Feuerbach draws negative theology into the realm of ontotheology as part of his exposing of such ontotheology as nothing more than self-projecting human idealism,

> God as God, i.e. as a being not finite, not human, not materially conditioned, not phenomenal, is only an object of thought. He is the incorporeal, formless, incomprehensible - the abstract, negative being; he is known, i.e. becomes an object only by abstraction and negation (via negationis)...God, said the Schoolmen, the Christian Fathers, and long before them the heathen philosophers, God is immaterial essence, intelligence, spirit, pure understanding,[76]

Negative theology has also come under attack in terms of its practical application. As God is only able to be described in terms of what God is not, believers in God either negate all of that in which God is not, or else consecrate all of that in which God is. To claim that Jesus Christ is the Incarnate Word demands he be regarded as a positive expression of God, and as such able to inspire His followers to acknowledge God as the One who creates, sustains and redeems, rather than to engage in pursuit of an unidentifiable deity through a process of constant negation or ritualistic consecration. Negative theology is a negating of the Christian God. Transcendence demands acknowledgement of the essential unknowability of God, that is not the same as saying we can know God naturally in negative terms. To acknowledge such unknowability is to do something far more radical. It demands the recognition of the need to render as nothing the desire to know God in order that God might create within us a sense of His reality. This creative act is a gracious act, a saving act, a redeeming act. 'Via Negativa' of itself reduces to nothing, but when accompanied by 'Via Positiva', then each is transformed in the light of the other. 'Via Positiva' is the ordained way of God, describing the gracious, saving, redeeming act which as it

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[76] Ingraffia, p227.

'collides' with human existence drives it down its own particular path of negation, at the end of which is not the nothingness of the void which Cupitt describes, but rather the embrace of a loving Father, the fellowship of an elder brother, ours to experience in the light of the powerful love manifest by the Holy Spirit. Both Via Negativa and Via Positiva coinhere in the language employed in making joyous response to the God who has so graciously revealed Himself.[77] This is able to be known because it is written down in the biblical text, the continuous and continuing story concerning the 'collision' between God's grace and human existence, evidenced supremely in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, bounded by the created order, destined to find its fulfilment in the eschaton.[78]

Faith demands life be established in terms of faith; 'faith must seek understanding.' To deny the possibility of 'knowing God' is to seem condemned to the limitations of selfish self-centredness. Any opportunity to rebut the contention that the limitations imposed upon us by our historical/cultural/linguistic world deny the possibility of our knowing anything of anything which might exist beyond it we must seize upon. Deconstruction affords the possibility of believing in the God described in the biblical text. By deconstructing theologies based upon a rationalist/empiricist epistemology, such criticism does not establish the necessity of non-realist theology, rather it invites the possibility of a fideistic epistemology. Such an epistemology can sustain both realist and non-realist theologies. all that is required is an enquiry into the reasonableness of the various theological positions in terms of what their purported basis: a realist theology based upon the revelation of God, or a non-realist theology based upon

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[77] "The doctrine of the Incarnation corrects both atheism and negative theology; the cloud of unknowing is dispersed on Christmas morning. The transcendental signified has become a sign. God's word has taken human form...In positive theology the father is revealed by the Son in and through the Spirit, thereby establishing a God that can be described albeit imperfectly in positive and negative predicates." Vanhoozer, Is there a Meaning in this Text? p310.

[78] Nowhere more eloquently described than in H. Thielicke's sermon, *The Foundation of Life,* in Life Can Begin Again: Sermons on the Sermon on the Mount, (ET: London: James Clarke, 1966), p214-215. The sermons were originally delivered in Stuttgart, Germany, between 1946 & 1948.

the embodiment of God within the linguistic/cultural realm.[79] A text which by its very structure invites the conclusion that it is the embodiment of the revelation of God who is establishing relationship with His creatures as surely as the biblical text draws its readers into itself because the description of how God relates is the story of the biblical text, and the biblical text describes how we might come into a relationship with God. It is not for us to seek God beyond its pages. God seeks us out in ways described upon its pages.[80]

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[79] Cupitt has himself been described as a fideist, C.Stephen Evans, Faith Beyond Reason, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p27-32.

[80] "A Triune conception of God's identity, grounded in a Biblical narrative description, is a natural and appropriate vehicle for the expression of God's gracious prevenience. The promising God deigns to share His identity with us and thereby establishes a relation with our human concepts and categories, enabling them to be the vehicle of His communication. But that relationship is established in such a way that God's prior gracious initiative is necessarily implied. If it is this God - Father, Son and Spirit - whom we are able to identify, then that identification has been enabled by His gracious action. God conceived as Triune, is a God necessarily prevenient." R. Thiemann, Revelation & Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise. (New York: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), p139-140.

Chapter 10

Interpreting the Message of the Resurrection.

1. Introduction

We have sought to confront Cupitt's assertion that Christianity is meaningful only in terms of non-realist theology by employing an epistemology derived from a particular understanding of revelation. An understanding derived from a consideration of the biblical text in terms of its rhetorical structure and its accomodatory language. Having defended this claim against the challenge of deconstructive literary criticism - a most extreme form of reader-response criticism - we now consider how this strategy might actually sustain a realist Christian theology.

Resurrection is central to Christian believing. Yet arguments that aim to 'prove' or 'disprove' the resurrection, 'prove' to be indeterminable.

> All this persuasive argument, when carried to its conclusion, seemed to imply that it was a thousand pities that no one could have been on the scene with a camera and flash bulb to settle the queries once and for all.[1]

Whilst such an approach has nothing to do with the 'meaning' of resurrection. we acknowledge that,

> Granted, it generally helps people if they are offered some reason for concluding that what they are encouraged to believe is not just a matter of wishful thinking.[2]

Again,

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[1] N. Clark, *The Gospel*, Invitation to a Conversation, pt 1, (Cardiff: SWBC, 1995), p14., Cf Interpreting the Resurrection, (London: SCM, 1967).
[2] Clark, The Gospel, p14.

> Does it make sense to talk of 'dying and rising with Christ' without an assurance that in some sense Christ actually died and rose? Can we be assured that the possibility is a genuine one unless we see it actually exemplified under the conditions of historical existence in the world.[3]

Indeed,

> Whether or not Biblical writers are aware of what constitutes a "fact', certain expressive or behavioural utterances presuppose 'facts' by their very force or logic.[4]

The structure of the biblical texts describing the events surrounding the resurrection indicate an intention to elicit a response from their readers in terms of their believing that 'in some sense Christ actually died and rose', in order to appreciate that so believing is a participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. The biblical texts are not so much concerned with 'factual' information about the events of the 'morning of the first day of the week', as with the significance of what was believed, subsequent to yet consequent upon, what did happen on that 'first day of the week'. They are not intended to describe controversial 'factual accounts' so that succeeding generations might 'merely' indulge in exegetical skirmishing. The facts of the resurrection remain forever unproveable but that does not mean that it is fiction. Ressurection speaks of that which is beyond being evidenced in the midst of that which is. Any attempt to provide an explanation is no explanation at all, yet failure to provide an explanation is interpreted as meaning there is nothing to explain.

2. Resurrection: How Non-Realist Theology Understands it.

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[3] J. Macquarrie, Philosophy and Theology in Bultmann's thought, in, A. Thiselton, Interpreting God and the Postmodern self, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p100, cf., f/note 4.
[4] Thiselton, Interpreting God, p100.

> They [the disciples] were clearly attempting to describe something that had happened, which itself did justify their faith. And what happened must have been something quite out of the ordinary.[5]

Myth based on fact, in order to convey a sense of something essentially mysterious - need anything more be said about the Easter story? Indeed, when explaining resurrection in a theologically non-realist way, is the following definition satisfactory? - "A unique, uniquely attested valid and validating event!"[6] The irony is not lost on anybody given that the justification for non-realist theology is our alleged inability to articulate God without so reducing God in order that God be able to be described in language. Here, an advocate of non-realist theology is lost for words when seeking to provide a non-realist explanation of resurrection. A further article illustrated the on-going dilemma. Could theological non-realists be satisfied with understanding resurrection in the following way?

> Resurrection speaks of an end to all finality and certainty. The dead Jesus continues to speak new words...the tomb is not merely empty but open. Resurrection is like a tear in the fabric of the world, a breach in the natural order. Nothing can again be completely finished...to apply the categories of natural and supernatural to the resurrection is to find them impossibly blended in a way that fatally compromises both.[7]

Thomas Sheahan treats New Testament descriptions of the events surrounding the 'so-called' resurrection as having developed one upon another. To get to the core one needs to identify the most immediate account. This for Sheahan is found at the end of Mark's Gospel. Sheahan proposes that this is a product of pre-Marcan oral tradition inspired by the personal experience of Simon Peter following a return to Galilee after Jesus' death.[8] It is this experience which lies behind subsequent embellishment of the events. Yet Sheahan cannot describe

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[5] M. Stewart. SOF 5, Spring 1991, p7.
[6] Stewart, SOF 5, p8.
[7] S. Jenkins. SOF 6, Summer 1991, p5.
[8] Sheahan, The First Coming, p93-126.

Peter's experience without using language more suited to a theologically realist perspective,

> Simon had an insight, a revelatory experience, that he took as a message from God's eschatological future...Simon and the other disciples experienced Easter. We cannot know with certainty the psychological genesis of that experience but we do know its result.[9]

This is how Sheahan describes the origin of the 'story' of the resurrection. When we consider his conclusions, similar ambiguities abound,

> At last Christianity is discovering what it was always about...the endless unresolvable mystery inscribed at the heart of being human...learning to live at the uncertain point that is the present-future without appeal to any beyond.[10]

Even for non-realist theology, the best explanation of resurrection is one couched in mystery. Whether one is realist or non-realist, theologically speaking, the most appropriate category of understanding resurrection is mystery.

3. The Mystery of Resurrection.

a) Reconciling the Mystery in terms of Non-Realist Theology.

> (It) requires us all to recognise that even the most hallowed of formularies are provisional. It invites us to accept as both challenge and duty the job

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[9] Sheahan, The First Coming, p104-105.
For a similar approach to interpreting the so-called eye-witness accounts of the Risen Christ - that of psychological reductionism - G. Ludemann, The Resurrection of Jesus, (ET: London: SCM, 1994). In review, B. Capper remarks, "With psychology at his disposal, Ludemann is able to reduce the experiences of Peter and Paul to purely subjective, guilt ridden phenomena which occurred in the lives of the two men who, as other New Testament evidence confirms, were prone to visions." Reviews in Religion and Theology, 1995/2, p38-40. A different sort of psychological explanation, projection, is offered by M. Barker, The Risen Lord: The Jesus of History as the Christ of Faith, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996).
[10] Sheahan, The First Coming, p227.

> of setting faith free from tradition that merely tyrannises, so that its voice can be heard afresh in the actual world of today.[11]

One 'hallowed formulary' enshrines what we believe concerning resurrection.

> In the resurrection of Jesus, for those who are faithful, there is the promise for His followers of life beyond physical death.[12]

Dawes continues, "(As with the virgin birth), the physical resurrection is something many faithful Christians can only sit light to."[13] However, we may respond that the promise 'of life beyond physical death' is not connected necessarily with 'physical resurrection.' Literary criticism directs us to 'life beyond physical death' - with all its attendant mystery - and away from 'physical resurrection'. Dawes pours scorn on those who put their energies into "the countless volumes of the 'who moved the stone' variety,"[14] Yet he follows the same line. He notes that for Paul, "the empty tomb was either not known or else regarded as insignificant"[15]; that the resurrection 'appearances' described by Paul are at odds with those of the Gospels· "Moreover, his [Paul's] version of appearances differs from the evangelists"[16] He notes that Mark's Gospel speaks of Jesus being seen, but gives no description of such appearances[17]. This 'exegetical' enquiry is then used as the backdrop to a theological enquiry. However his conclusions are limited by their having to be constrained by 'facts'. Dawes continues,

> What the first Christians are struggling to express, what they are seeking words and images for, is their faith conviction that in the case of Jesus at least, evil has not had the final word. Nothing literally undoes the death of

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[11] H. Dawes, Freeing The Faith, (London: SPCK, 1992), p3.
[12] Dawes, Freeing the Faith, p54.
[13] Dawes, Freeing the Faith, p55.
[14] Dawes, p56, referring to Frank Morrison's, Who moved the stone? (London: Faber & Faber, 1968).
[15] Dawes, p56 - a conclusion reached in the light of Paul's testimony, 1 Corinthians, 15, vs. 1-8. Contrast with Paul's preaching in Acts, 13, vs. 28-37.
[16] Dawes, p56.
[17] Dawes, p56. Assumes that Mark 16 ends at verse 8. There is an extended ending, verses 9-20, which does include references to post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, echoing Luke 24, and Matthew 28.

> Jesus for nothing can. What resurrection is trying to say is that this death has not undone His life.[18]

Where do such sentiments lead? Dawes is forced to work within the limitations imposed by what possibilities remain. Resurrection is best understood not as the promise of some physical life beyond death, whether for Jesus or His followers. Yet the claim of physical life beyond death is one which has rarely been made. Dawes has no alternative but to see Jesus in solidarity with humankind within an entirely human context. This demands that Jesus be 'liberated from the shackles of Divinity'. God's man, but not God as man. Dawes wishes to extinguish God from the human mind in order that humankind can be in solidarity with one another. However, this idea was developed by Bonhoeffer in terms of realist theology,

> Who is God? Not in the first place an abstract belief in God, in His omnipotence etc. This is not a genuine experience of God, but a partial extension of the world. Encounter with Jesus Christ? The experience that a transformation of all human life is given in the fact that 'Jesus is there only for others'. His 'being there for others' is the experience of transcendence. It is only this 'being there for others', maintained till death, that is the ground of His omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence. Faith is participation in the being of Jesus (incarnation, cross, resurrection)...God in human form - not, as in oriental religions, in animal form, monstrous, chaotic, remote and terrifying, nor in conceptual forms of the absolute, metaphysical, infinite etc., nor yet in the Greek divine-human form of 'man in himself', but in 'the man for others, and therefore the crucified, the man who lives out of the transcendent.[19]

Dawes continues by quoting from David Jenkins' Easter sermon, 1988:

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[18] Dawes, p58.
[19] D. Bonhoeffer in E.Bethge, (ed), Letters and Papers from Prison, p381-382.

> The happening of an extremely mysterious and unlikely event, even if it is of a man coming alive again after an undoubted death, is just that - the establishing of a mysterious and unlikely event. The question for faith or for hope or for wonder or for praise is still, so what?[20]

By prescribing in advance his understanding of resurrection, Dawes is restricted to applying it metaphorically to life as it is. His unwillingness to acknowledge the possibility of the reality of God, more specifically the assertion that 'God is at work in Christ', denies the possibility of resurrection being understood as an act of Divine grace. What, religiously speaking, is he left with?

> Jesus is to be the focus of an open Christianity. We reject the transcendent 'other' - holocaust/nuclear weapons/scientific knowledge has rendered the 'idea of such a God meaningless'. Dawes uses a non-realised use of God - the name we choose to give to the value and meaning in life. Why God? Within the Judaeo-Christian tradition God has always been essentially the 'transcendent other' who takes the initiative in encounter with human beings. Dawes argues that resurrection can be recast as the 'faith that the good person is not beaten by the apparent meanness of the world', but why shouldn't such a belief also be rendered meaningless by holocaust/nuclear weapons/scientific knowledge?[21]

Dawes may have decided that 'traditional theological realism' did not fit the 'facts of life'; but neither is it obvious that theological ideas recast in non-realist terms are adequate for the task. The structure of the resurrection narratives which describes Jesus as having been raised from the dead does at least suggest that it be understood in terms of Divine activity. Essentially mysterious, but mystery understood in terms other than of metaphor. Dawes' non-realist theology demands that he deny possibilities which the texts open up. By denying the

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[20] Quoted, Dawes, Freeing the Faith, p61. Jenkins' 'definition' of resurrection, - 'a man coming alive again after an undoubted death' - suggests a 'limited' perspective.
[21] F. Dixon, reviewing Dawes', Freeing the Faith,: Contact, No.110, 1993/1, p36-37.

mysterious, he seeks to ensure that the texts never yield up mysteries. There is always that which is waiting to be encountered - the tomb is empty. Dawes' response appears paltry over against the riches inherent in the text – surely this cannot be the response envisaged by the authors, the witnesses?[22]

David Hart is another who interprets resurrection from a non-realist perspective.[23] He concurs with D.F. Strauss that the supernatural elements of the Gospels are primarily mythological rather than historical.[24] Strauss' legacy has been inherited by such as Bultmann,

> If the event of Easter day is in any sense an historical event additional to the historical event of the cross, it is nothing else than the rise of faith in the risen Lord since it was this faith which led to the Apostolic preaching.[25]

However, the mystery remains. Is not Bultmann's use of the phrase, 'risen Lord' significant? He may be seeking to emphasise the faith of those engaged in the Apostolic preaching, but faith in whom or what? The 'risen Lord'!?

Hart concludes,

> Even without the benefit of modern Biblical scholarship the Gospel stories of the resurrection appear anything but clear-cut accounts of the rising of a physical body, and are at the very least mutually incompatible accounts. With the insights of such higher criticism, we are left seeing the stories as highly charged theologically, needing to be purged of 1st century assumptions.[26]

How did this notion of 'the rising of a physical body' come to be considered? If the resurrection is witness to, or evidence of life beyond death, must the resurrection of Jesus entail a physical, bodily, resurrection? What if the 'stories

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[22] There is a parallel with the structure of classical rhetoric; the idea of copia - copiousness - that element of the text's which 'speaks' of its richness as a way of inviting the hearer/reader to consider its merits. The rhetoric of the Biblical text is suggestive of a richness which theological non-realism could never contain.
[23] D. Hart, Faith in doubt, - Non-realism and Christian belief, (London: Mowbray, 1993).
[24] Hart, Faith in Doubt, p29.
[25] R. Bultmann, New Testament and Mythology, in Kerygma and myth, A Theological Debate, (London: SPCK, 1972), vol. 1, p42, in Hart, Faith in Doubt, p29.
[26] Hart, Faith in Doubt, p30.

are highly charged theologically', why does such 'highly charged theology' have to be at the expense of an historical dimension? It is ironic that the rationalism of the 19th century critic is invoked to support Hart's argument. We saw earlier that Michalson took Kant to task for wanting to advocate a 'new morality' while insisting on describing the 'existence of evil' in premodern terms.[27] Post-modernism seeks to undo the modernist agenda. Hart employs the insights of post-modernism with great enthusiasm, supporting arguments in favour of such enthusiasm by appealing to ideas supplanted by those same insights. Moreover, Hart is guilty of the same non sequitur when referring to the following words of the Archbishop of Canterbury,

> The mode of the resurrection is tantalisingly unclear; Christ's body appears to have properties which transcended the earthly body of Jesus; He appears and disappears.[28]

From this Hart concludes,

> And here we have to face the fact that the physical raising of the dead so that they walk around again is simply not part of the credible inhabited western world of our time.[29]

The Archbishop of Canterbury did not describe resurrection in such terms; not because he necessarily agrees with Hart but because those who don't agree with Hart don't describe resurrection that way. As he continues, Hart compounds his error,

> Our scientific and medically knowledgeable culture rejects as invalid the attempts of earlier cultures to divided humankind into dualistic characteristics - body and mind, soul and spirit - and thereby allow the possibility that one element could have a life independent of the other. We no longer deem it credible that the mind could leave the body and at

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[27] See the extended discussion in chapter 1.
[28] Quoted Hart, Faith in Doubt, p31.
[29] Hart, p31.

some later stage be reunified with it. The self is one. And when the body dies the soul/spirit dies with it never to be reunited for some new task. So the 20th century takes to itself the words of the Greek poet, Pindar, 'O my soul, do not aspire to immortal life, but exhaust the limits of the possible'![30]

What Hart describes owes more to the 'infiltration' of Greek philosophical ideas - hence the irony of his quoting from Pindar , 'O my soul, do not aspire to immortal life, but exhaust the limits of the possible!'[31]- than to realist Christian theology. Hart next considers the funeral rite of the Church of England ASB.[32]

> Heavenly father, in Your Son Jesus Christ You have given us a true and sure hope. Strengthen this faith and hope in us all our days, that we may live as those who believe in the Communion of saints, the Forgiveness of sins, and the Resurrection to Eternal Life.[33]

Surely the encouragement here is for those who remain to embrace beliefs which will strengthen them in their living, regardless of any beliefs the deceased may have had. While statistically at least, the deceased would have been unlikely to have held such beliefs, that does not demand, as Hart proposes, the redefining of the traditional beliefs contained within the prayer in terms of being relevant only to this life; this would be an exercise in 'realised eschatology', interpreted as a step along the way to non-realist theology. There is a tension here regarding eschatology. It is a non sequitur to equate realised eschatology with non-realist theology. Eschatology even when it is thoroughly realised can be incorporated within a realist theology. Of greater religious significance is the fact that conservative, fundamentalist elements within theological development have tended to disregard any sense of a realised element within their eschatological

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[30] Hart, Faith in Doubt, p31.
[31] Quoted Hart, p31.
[32] As published in 1980.
[33] Quoted Hart, p31.

understanding. We have sympathy with Hart when, drawing attention to Harry Williams' work on resurrection,[34] he remarks,

> At the end of his book on the resurrection, Harry Williams suggests that with regard to the afterlife, the pessimistic and rationalistic will tend to deny, while the optimistic and romantic [will tend] to affirm its existence. He believes we can retain traditional imagery as long as we make distinctions between 'hope' and 'desire'. My feeling is that the earliest Biblical accounts of resurrection faith were not in essence eschatological but always realised. Or in simpler terms, to believe in Eternal Life was ever meant to be an insight into this life rather than any glimpse into the next.[35]

Be it 'realised' or not, resurrection faith is always eschatological. Hart has failed to appreciate the distinction to which Williams referred, that between 'hope' and 'desire'.

> Since Christianity par excellence among the religions calls us to deny the self, any attempt to rehabilitate the self in another world ought to be resisted as a form of selfishness.[36]

Essential to the Christian Gospel is a hope from beyond this world offered by the God who dwells beyond it. In light of this hope we are called to self-denial in this world. We are not to deny ourselves in this world merely to satisfy our desire concerning what another world has to offer.[37] There is tension between 'here and now' and 'there and then'. Failure to balance that tension is due to a failure to come to terms with the issue of the nature of belief itself. Much of our discussion consequent upon the arguments of Dawes and Hart has been to do with believing propositionally rather than dispositionally. Dawes and Hart criticise traditional faith for being unduly propositional, thereby inviting refutation by rational argument. They appeal for some form of dispositional believing, yet still

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[34] H.Williams, True Resurrection, (London: Fount, 1983).
[35] Hart, Faith in Doubt, p47.
[36] Hart, p47.
[37] See, Heb. 11, 1. & 1 Corinthians, 15, 19.

demand the right to employ rational argument in order to describe an acceptable framework within which dispositional believing might flourish. This is where their argument fails. In arguing that we can prove nothing, they seek to prove too much.

> For many, perhaps the majority, faith has been defined as a matter of logical assent to propositional truths that are located in an authoritative source and that is supposed to provide a superior connection to truth than anyone outside the community of the faithful could ever attempt to discover by any other means...However, linguistically this may well rest on a mistake, since it appears to demand a particular epistemology or doctrine of reality, namely a 'correspondence theory' of truth with which many philosophers of language today would take issue.[38]...There is another understanding of faith which runs counter to this...This would be the emphasis on faith not as a collection of beliefs but as the means by which an individual lives, generally taken as in relation to God. This is not under any understanding a variety of factual belief, it is sui generis, an attitude to life which can be characterised as one of basic trust and acceptance.[39]

Whether it be resurrection in particular, or the content of Christian belief in general, to deny its propositional foundation is not necessarily to deny the reality of God so described. God's liberation from the shackles of a propositionalist faith, might be in itself a celebration of resurrection - the means by which God is able to live?

B) Reconciling the Mystery in terms of Realist Theology

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[38] Hart, Faith in Doubt, p118.
[39] Hart, Faith in Doubt, p118-119.

We have often alluded to the fact that postmodern insights provide a positive contribution to interpreting the biblical text in terms of a realist theology which might be described as 'Barthian'.[40] David Demson provides an examination of Barth's commentary on the resurrection and ascension of Jesus.[41] For Barth, as far as the text is concerned:

> It is to what happened in this part that the Epistles and the Apocalypse looks back - that is, to Jesus Christ as He appeared according to the concluding section of the gospel account. Everything said in the Acts, the Epistles and the Apocalypse is said on this basis. The community expects Jesus to come again in the mode in which he appeared to the apostles in the forty days. Jesus in this mode is its origin and goal...While the community is, of course, interested in his words and acts and crucifixion, it is interested in them because of who he is, and who he is is manifested to the apostles in the forty days and by way of the apostles' witness to many in the power of the Holy Spirit.[42]

Although the 'pre-Easter' record of the life of Jesus, chronologically speaking precedes the resurrection, its compilation, subsequent to the resurrection allows resurrection to be understood as the basis upon which it is compiled. As such it

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[40] Reviewing D. Tracy's, Plurality and Ambiguity, D.G. Dawe comments on Barth's particular perspective. "Tracy is carrying on the critique of modernity staple in theology since neo-orthodoxy...the affirmation of Christian revelation by refuting the pretensions of modernity. In the Biblical vision, revelation is not a 'human' insight or glimpse of reality granted from within a religious community. It is a gift of God to which humankind is to respond in faith and obedience. In its recognition by human beings, revelation is expressed in pluralistic and ambiguous ways. To give religious experience and tradition the centrality Tracy does in this fundamental theology is to be unable to affirm revelation as a self-authenticating disclosure of God. Barth's criticism of natural theology, even in this new postmodern form is still very much to the point." Interpretation, Vol. 43/4, p412-414. We saw earlier, how G. Ward has sought to use Derrridaean ideas to try and develop an anti-foundationalist realism in his essay, *Theological Materialism,* in C. Crowder, (ed.), God and Reality: Essays on Christian Non-Realism, (Leicester: Mowbray, 1997). He has also utilised similar ideas in regard to Barth, in his Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology. (Cambridge: CUP, 1995). The most complete treatment of Barth's theology in relation to postmodern ideas can be found in W.S. Johnson, The Mystery of God: Karl Barth and the Postmodern Foundations of Theology, (Louisville, Kentucky: W/JKP, 1997). Similarly, Ormerod, in discussing Dulles' treatment of revelation in terms of dialectic presence remarks that "Its main exponent is the leading Protestant Theologian, Karl Barth", Introducing Contemporary Theologies, p45.

[41] D. Demson, Hans Frei and Karl Barth, Different Ways of Reading Scripture, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p74-85. Barth's treatment of the subject is found in CD IV/2, p131-154.

[42] Demson, Hans Frei & Karl Barth, p75. cf. CD, IV/2, p134.

comes to be understood as being in anticipation of the actual 'Easter' event. Dawes and Hart began with the human Jesus according to whom resurrection is to be understood. Barth begins with the resurrected Christ, in anticipation of which the life of the 'purely human' Jesus is to be understood. It is only possible to discern the true identity of Jesus from the perspective of resurrection because only in His death can the identity of Jesus be fully recognised, because it is only in the act of His dying that Jesus fully reveals Himself - "Until Jesus' death on the cross, He had not fully enacted His identity."[43] "The resurrection and ascension are the manifestation of Jesus in the fullness of His enacted identity."[44] The fact of Jesus' death enacting His full identity can only be understood from the perspective of the risen Christ. Resurrection is an act of revelation, as is the 'pre-Easter' life of Jesus, as is His death. To be understood as an act of revelation, it needed to occur within space and time.[45] As the risen Christ, Jesus was perceived to be who He is, not merely observed as who he was because the witnesses were able to equate the risen Christ with the crucified Jesus in terms of the essential continuity manifest in the way He revealed Himself after the resurrection.[46] Resurrection reveals Jesus; who he is, who he still is, who he always will be. Such self-manifestation is an act of God.

> The very event in which Jesus manifests his identity to certain men, so that they may know and love and depend upon him, has the incomprehensible character that belongs to the act of God.[47]

Demson continues,

> If the Apostles, and men and women after them by way of their word, have a knowledge of Jesus' identity, it is because Jesus, in the power of God's act, shares it with them. This means that they can neither gain it from

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[43] Demson, p78.
[44] Demson, p79.
[45] CD IV/2, p143. Hence T.F. Torrance's, Space, Time and Resurrection, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1976).
[46] CD IV/2, p145.
[47] Demson, Hans Frei & Karl Barth, p83.

themselves nor at any time exercise any control over it. They cannot make it comprehensible to themselves or others, but must rely on Him 'who still is and shall be evermore' in the power of God's act to make it comprehensible to them.[48]

Is it reasonable to interpret the texts which record the resurrection as yielding up this particular point of view, or do they more reasonably invite the conclusions reached by Sheahan which in turn give rise to the theological perspective espoused by Dawes and Hart? According to Demson, Barth is careful to indicate that what we 'know' of the resurrection is historical knowledge, the discovering of which "will involve the most impartial and painstaking investigation of the *texts* which speak of this event."[49] Not a search for facts behind the text, but an enquiry into the texts themselves. Demson's summary of Barth's approach has a postmodern ring,

> [the investigation] will seek to find what the texts say in their attestation of this event. It will not fit them into some picture of the world and history. It will not prescribe in advance what the texts can and cannot say, nor will it impose questions on the texts that the texts themselves do not ask, but rather will attend to the questions that the texts raise and remain open to the replies that they give. It belongs to this impartiality that 'we allow the New Testament texts to say what they themselves wish to say and do actually say.'[50]

The intratextual dynamic of the particular narratives of the resurrection, is directed towards persuading the apostles that the Risen Christ is one with the earthly Jesus. This is in order that they appreciate the life of the earthly Jesus as having been lived in anticipation of his death, - an act in space and time, a revelatory act concerning the salvific purpose of God - and his resurrection, - an

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[48] Demson, p83. See CD IV/2, p149.
[49] CD IV/2, p149.
[50] Demson, Hans Frei & Karl Barth, p83-84. See CD IV/2, 150.

act in space and time, a revelatory act concerning the identity of the One who lived and died, and who is risen, so to be recognised forevermore. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to conclude that its extratextual impact ought to be adjudged similarly. The texts are rhetorical, eliciting a response from their readers, just as the events themselves demanded a response from their actual witnesses. How any individual might respond is for them to decide, but it is not legitimate to recast the textual record in order that it justifiy a response made in the light of extra-textual considerations.

George Hunsinger. concentrates on the relationship between text and referent.[51] Literalism equates text and referent, expressivism requires more detailed definition. This Hunsinger provides in terms of what it is not, i.e. he describes the Biblical texts in terms of their not being merely expressive.

> The Biblical texts were not essentially metaphorical or symbolic objectifications of the emotive responses, however profound, which sacred objects or events had aroused in the religious subjects by whom the texts were produced.[52]

Hunsinger describes Barth's approach as 'hermeneutical realism'; between literalism and expressivism. To illustrate this Hunsinger considers how Barth deals with resurrection. Barth does not demand certainty regarding what the text asserts. Its method of address is not exclusively cognitive. It is not seeking to communicate value-neutral information. Language used of God is not necessarily univocal. The task of the interpreter is crucial. This invites attention to be paid to the distinction between 'intratextual' and 'extratextual' - not just in terms of the impression created by the events themselves and the text which describes them, but also as regards interpretation of the text. Barth is not driven by the priority of the extratextual; Barth does not give objective, extratextual status to the empty

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[51] G. Hunsinger, *Beyond Literalism and Expressivism: Karl Barth's hermeneutical Realism,* Modern Theology, 3:3, 1987, p209f.
[52] Hunsinger, *Beyond Literalism...*, p213.

tomb.[53] The true referent of the resurrection narratives is the 'living Jesus Christ'. The extratextual status of this 'living Jesus Christ' cannot be described. It is a mystery, locating the historical within the suprahistorical, the temporal within the eternal, combining 'objectifiable and non-objectifiable' elements. However this cannot be at the expense of the historical continuum. Jesus' humanity, His body, must play a role in all of this. The God hidden in and behind the human Jesus is revealed in the resurrected Christ[54].The human Jesus is one with the resurrected Christ. This essential continuity is the extratextual referent of the resurrection narratives[55], generated by the intratextual dynamic of the events surrounding the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, as compared with the empty tomb which is understood in terms of intratextual significance, not as a point of extratextual reference. The risen Christ, understood as an essential continuing of the life of Jesus demands an empty tomb. Barth's analysis does demand some sense of a factual, extratextually definable empty tomb.[56] Barth's position regarding the relationship between Biblical text and historical referent is not easily understood. This causes Hunsinger to examine how Barth views the relationship between text and event generally. Barth understands the events described in the Biblical text as infused with an ineffable quality apprehensible only by faith.[57] The physicality of the risen Christ and its relationship to the corpse of the crucified Jesus and any attendant empty tomb are essentially ineffable. This ineffability places their understanding beyond the reach of historical-critical method.[58] While this may not be sufficient, it is a reasonable proposal for understanding resurrection without presupposing a total lack of basis in fact; albeit incapable of being established

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[53] Barth, C/D III/2, p453.
[54] Barth deals with the question of the hiddenness of God in C/D, II/1, p179f.
[55] Hunsinger, *Beyond Literalism..*, p210-211
[56] Hunsinger, p211.
[57]"If God is ultimate mystery - never a 'caged bird' but always a 'bird in flight' - and if reflection about God must always 'begin again at the beginning', then Barthian theology is best conceived not as a repristination of past orthodoxy but as an ongoing response to Divine mystery". Johnson, The Mystery of God, p5.
[58] Barth, C/D, III/2, p446, 451.

extratextually, yet able to provide a sufficient basis for a response to have to be made to its rhetorical thrust.

The referent, the risen Christ, is essentially ineffable; therefore He needs to be signposted. The text must prompt response from within its own description of the events surrounding the revelation.[59] The empty tomb bears an 'analogical'[60] relationship to the referent; an imaginative response to the appearing of the risen Christ, which points the way from the risen Christ to the human Jesus.

Having established this, Hunsinger demonstrates how Barth investigates the intratextual significance of the resurrection narratives. Here Barth offers powerful support to our general thesis. Barth concentrates on the

> Narrative patterns by which the identity of Jesus is cumulatively depicted through the interaction of character and circumstance. It was precisely the intratextual analogies and patterns (not the literal details) which interested him...he thought it was these analogies and patterns themselves which carried the referential or extratextual force.[61]

What is being suggested is a network of intratextual patterns and a real, though ineffable extratextual subject mediated by analogical predication. This argument relies upon such predication having been inspired by the grace of God mediated according to the textual description of revelation. Divine inspiration lay behind the formulation of the text, and the appropriation of its truth. This is where Barth confronts expressivism. As far as understanding resurrection is concerned, no external material is required, no philosophical speculation necessary, nor any

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[59] Hunsinger, *Beyond Literalism,* p212.

[60]The use of 'analogy' in Barth needs to be understood in terms of its specific application - 'analogia fidei' - the analogy of faith, a way of talking of God, consequent upon Divine revelation, borne out of prevenient grace. G.Ward has described the 'analogia fidei' as promoting a theological discourse which operates always under the shadow of an absolute epistemological and ontological difference between our world and God's. Barth, Derrida, and the Language of Theology, p97f. This may be the shadow under which 'God-talk' takes place, nevertheless such talk is possible because of the use of the principle of accommodation on the part of God.

[61] Hunsinger, *Beyond Literalism..*, p212.

cultural analysis need be applied.[62] This is of crucial importance for in this regard Barth deals with the more general question of talk about God.

Barth argues that language is formed within the human sphere. The question is therefore, how is it possible to talk of God? God-talk can come from beyond and yet locate itself within the human sphere. God-talk need not necessarily emerge out of the human realm. Expressivists may construct their theological vocabulary around immediate experience, but Barth's theological vocabulary is determined by the requirement to have to respond to revelation. The semantic relation between metaphorical text and Divine referent is, for the expressivist, equivocal; for Barth it is analogical. Cupitt's expressivism is of a particular type, built upon an already determined theological non-realism. The expressivism being discussed in this context can be understood in terms of natural theology. However such expressivism appears incapable of sustaining itself in terms of realist theology. It 'reduces' itself to theological non-realism, its 'Feuerbachian denouement'.

> In short, for expressivism, which metaphors and concepts to use were largely discretionary, emotively based and fraught with the corresponding uncertainty; for Barth which to use was largely obligatory, scripturally based and secured with the corresponding confidence. God's 'true revelation', Barth wrote, 'Comes from out of itself to meet what we can say with our human words and makes a selection from among them to which we have to attach ourselves in obedience.' [63]

Grace provides words for 'God's self-analogization', and then imparts, verifies, and actualises them in terms of personal encounter. This is accommodation, culminating in incarnation. We are describing a particular 'analogy of attribution' For Barth the true way of understanding the semantic relation between

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[62] Hunsinger, p213.
[63] Hunsinger, *Beyond Literalism..,* p215, Quoting Barth, C/D II/1, p227. cf. C/D, I/1, p315-316.

metaphorical text and Divine referent depends on three convictions; God has engaged in revelation, it is attested to in the Bible, and is essentially reliable.

> Although Scriptural metaphors, concepts and words were, like all human language, 'wholly and utterly insufficient', they were in all their human frailty, by the grace of Divine revelation, 'sufficient to apprehend God's being (the one, entire, indivisible being of God), and therefore to be true, to express and establish true knowledge of God.' The veracity of the semantic relation between text and referent could not be impugned by appealing to the general insufficiency of human language to appeal to God.[64]

This analogical basis of language about God is emphasised when considering the meaning of the resurrection from the point of view of the 'mode of address' of the text. A literalist approach limits its impact contrary to the declared intention of the referent. The risen Christ is not concerned primarily with cognitive propositions; neither are the authors of the texts which describe the activity of the risen Christ. An expressivist approach denies the essential sovereignty claimed for the risen Christ by the risen Christ, and therefore denies that any essential responsibility falls upon the reader. Yet this is a responsibility which invites itself to be addressed according to the mode of address of the text. Barth uses the idea of a 'kergymatic' approach which corrects, combines and transcends the cognitive and emotive elements within it.[65] The notion of certainty, which attaches itself to the text in order for it to be Scripture is contrasted with the foundationalist approach adopted by literalism, and the relativist approached adopted by expressivism. Barth uses 'provisional sufficiency'[66]. It cannot be absolute because it presents itself as moving to completion; it cannot be relative because it is moving to completion. It is provisional. Yet it is sufficient because as it moves

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[64] Hunsinger, *Beyond Literalism..,* p216, quoting Barth, C/D, II/1, p235,
[65] Hunsinger, p218.
[66] Hunsinger, p220.

toward completion it gathers up those who would be part of what is as yet incomplete. We are persuaded of its certainty by our being encountered here and now, the confirmation of which waits for the there and then.

> We could never escape the 'dialectic of certainty and uncertainty which is our part in this event...yet not in such a way that we are still in the grip of that dialectic; rather in such a way that the dialectic is directed and controlled from the side of the event which is God's part'[67].

Hunsinger's analysis confirms Demson's conclusions regarding Barth's reading of the resurrection narratives. They provide the 'lynch-pin' of scripture. Of themselves they elicit response causing those who respond to encourage everyone to so respond. Such response is of faith. Just as we who respond are then to appropriate the future in the light of it, so the text must indicate how God, to whom we respond according to His accommodating Himself to us in Jesus Christ, reveals the future such that we who respond might know God in the midst of the future. This too, is gleaned from considering the resurrection narratives, and leads us to consider Dalferth's examination of Barth's position - what he describes as 'eschatological realism'.[68] Barth's position is realist, philosophically, he affirms a mind-independent reality defined theologically in terms of an existing God. For Barth, realist philosophy is necessary because we believe in a real God.

> Therefore, God's revelation allows theological statements to refer to realities; the risen and present Christ himself grounds and legitimates all our reference .[69]

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[67] Barth, C/D,II/1, p74-75, in Hunsinger, *Beyond Literalism..*, p220.
[68] I. Dalferth, *Karl Barth's Eschatological Realism,* in S. Sykes, (ed.), Karl Barth: Centenary Essays, (Cambridge: CUP, 1989). A similar approach is adopted by Johnson, The Mystery of God, p117f. He notes that for Barth, the resurrection was understood as within a three-fold movement; Resurrection, Pentecost, and Parousia, which in Trinitarian terms comes to be interpreted as a single event embracing origination, continuation and consumation. C/D, IV/1, p342.
[69] L. Ayres, Reviews in Religion and Theology, 1995/4, p17.

For Barth, all 'reality' is to be judged in terms of Christology. This leads Barth to provide a theological perspective on all that is. Dalferth refers to Barth as having an 'indirect theological metaperspective' on non-theological perspectives, our perspective on 'history' can only ever be preliminary, emerging as it does out of human fallenness. The revelation of God in Christ is the determining feature of the whole of human history. It is an act of God, in and through which we are invited to believe and participate in spite of the human condition because it is a saving act. This is set forth in the drama of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is through the text that we appropriate the grace of God as described on its pages. By considering the way Barth interprets the resurrection narratives, we find that theological realism is an entirely reasonable conclusion. The structure of the texts suggests such a conclusion. By adopting a postmodern approach to the text - inviting it to yield up its conclusion without the encumbrance of philosophical presupposition - Barth, and those who share his views - have shown that theological realism can flourish in such a climate. This is seen to its best when the content of the text is interpreted according to its rhetorical structure, interpreted, creatively, in terms of 'reader response criticism'.

4. <u>The Mystery of Resurrection Understood Theologically</u>.

We have exhausted the line of enquiry which Cupitt's approach demands; an historical-critical reading of the biblical text shaped within a framework of philosophical presuppositions. Such an approach demands that the text be deconstructed to discern its proper meaning. The text will not allow itself to be so constrained. We have sought to establish an alternative, thereby availing ourselves of the mystery which the text desires to yield up of itself.

For me that encouragement came from the experience of approaching the Easter happening from the two opposite directions, forward from a

historical Good Friday Cross and backwards from a historical post-Easter Church.[70]

Such an approach locates us within the eschatological framework with its attendant provisionality which is indicative of the hopes and fears which seem to bundle themselves up as the human condition. This is a framework which begins to be understood in terms of its embracing all that there is from beginning to end.

At the root of the problem seemed to be the difficulty of talking intelligibly about the beginning of history and the end of history. In between, flash bulbs and cameras in principle work splendidly. They capture things in time and space. But what can you do with the beginning of time and the end of time? The first of these we may call 'creation' or the 'first day'. The second we may call 'fulfilment' or the 'last day'. Now tell me where the resurrection of Jesus belongs?

So far as people of the New Testament period were concerned, it seemed fairly clear that resurrection was not something presumed to happen to Tom, Dick or Harry at death, but to be one of the ingredients of what would happen when God's cosmic experiment was finally wound up and the 'end' came and time would be no more. Now suppose that you were wanting to say that what happened to Jesus belonged there. Suppose that you were wanting to affirm not that some figure had survived death, not that some corpse had been re animated, but that in the person of Jesus, Son of God and proper man, the cosmic experiment had reached its goal, the end tape had been breasted, and God's dream in creation had found an embodied fulfilment, then what language other than resurrection would you use? What other language could you use? You would be talking about the final conquest of death and the final triumph of life, about transformation, fulfilment and humanity in the realm of glory...It

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[70] Clark, The Gospel,, p14.

would then be no accident that when the Gospels wandered around the Easter skyline almost the only thing they could agree about was that the risen Christ was one and the same with the crucified Jesus. I never supposed that the empty tomb had overmuch to do with restoration or transformation of bones and sinews. What it seemed to me to scream was that what the risen Christ carried with Him to glory was not an empty humanity but a humanness crammed with every experience that lay between Bethlehem and Calvary. The Jesus who died and was raised became what He was and is through the tangled task of living. He was formed by His joys and sorrows, by His words and works, by His dreams and deeds, by His giving and receiving, by His love and His loneliness, by what he achieved and by what he suffered. This was the fullness of life carried into His resurrection. It was no ghost that haunted the garden and immortalised Emmaus Road. It was this Jesus...[Therefore] our lives in Christ must be destined not for destruction but for completion. We too can look for life embodied, the fulfilment of a humanity which here in time we have slowly and painfully begun to build. The experiences which have seared or exalted us, the relationships which have embraced us or finally eluded us, the memories we have guarded, the dreams we have cherished, the tasks we have laboured to perform, the intimations of beauty, truth and goodness we have welcomed - these must be the stuff of resurrection. They have made us what we are and will contribute to what we shall be. In Christ we are promised our humanity. There will be no waste.[71]

Cupitt's commitment to seek the betterment of humankind echoes much of this He would find it easy to endorse such sentiments with his own amen. But will his agenda be able to bring about their accomplishing? Can we resurrect ourselves?

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[71]Clark, The Gospel, p14-16.

Is all that we can do is to crucify ourselves? Does the purely human Jesus offer any prospect of securing what is held out by the risen Christ? A serious engagement with Jesus the Christ - born not of a detached exegetical enquiry but of a profound hermeneutic encounter - demands that faith believe that God is, and that no philosophical frame of reference can exclude it. One cannot be made to be believe, but belief cannot be denied. This may be all that theological discourse can give us, but is any thing more necessary?

Epilogue: Reading the Resurrection

We have understood the biblical text to be the bearer of the special revelation of God. It contains a description of how this revelation was set within history, within community. It indicates how this revelation was appropriated by its witnesses. It tells how its readers might themselves make sense of, understand, interpret, appropriate this revelation. It suggests how any subsequent experience of the God revealed in the events described in the text might be able to be discerned as constituted by, consistent with and confirmatory of the activity of the Spirit whose activity is at the centre of the revelatory acts described in the texts themselves.
We will now consider the texts themselves, and make our response[1].

In Mark's Gospel, chapter 16, 1-8[2] we have the briefest and most abrupt description of resurrection. There is no record of an actual resurrection appearance by Christ. There is a description of an empty tomb, and of a young man who addresses the women to the effect that Jesus, the crucified, has risen, and that they were to tell the disciples and Peter that the risen Christ would be seen by them in Galilee. We are told the women left in fear, and told no one of these things.

The Galilean context is developed in Matthew. In chapter 28, 1-7 we have a parallel, albeit slightly extended account of Mark, 16, 1-7, save for the specific reference to Peter. However, in contrast to Mark, Matthew tells us that they left with fear and great joy and did go to tell the disciples. Whilst on their way, the risen Christ greets them, they recognise Him, and worship Him, taking hold of His feet. Jesus Himself repeats the instruction of the angel concerning His intention

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[1] There are many books written concerning the interpretation of the resurrection narratives. We have consulted none, choosing rather to engage directly with the text in terms of the thesis as developed.
[2]Although undoubtedly significant when making a detailed textual study, we will not be considering the extended ending(s) of Mark, containing as they do material which is in the main found in other Gospels, and which is most unlikely to have been part of the original Gospel of Mark.

to meet the disciples in Galilee. 8-10. Verses 11-15 tell of how the Roman authorities 'covered up' the fact of the resurrection by concocting a story so as to explain how the tomb came to be empty – Jesus' body had been stolen by His disciples. Verses 16-20 tell of the meeting in Galilee between the risen Christ and the disciples, and of His commissioning of them in his service.

Luke 24, 1-11 speaks of women going to the tomb, finding it empty, discovering two angelic beings who remind them of Jesus' own prediction of His crucifixion and resurrection, whilst in Galilee. The women went to the disciples and told them the story, but they did not believe them. Verse 12, a later addition speaks of Peter going to the tomb, finding it empty, and returning home perplexed. Verses 13-35 tell of two followers of Jesus journeying from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Christ journeys with them, though he is not recognised by them as they travel. They tell Him of what has happened up to and including the report of the women. Jesus is then said to explain to them the significance of the events surrounding His death and His resurrection. Christ enters the house with them, a meal is prepared, Christ blesses the bread, and is recognised as He does so, whereupon He vanishes. The travellers return to Jerusalem, to the disciples who tell them that Christ has risen and appeared to Peter (not previously mentioned by Luke). They tell their story, and the risen Christ appears among them, verses 36-43, they are startled/frightened, not recognising. He shows His hands and feet, and challenges them to see and to believe. He then eats fish from them. In verses 44-49, he speaks to them of the things he had shared with the travellers, commissions them into His service, and tells them to wait in Jerusalem. Verses 50-52, speak of His ascension near to Bethany, close to Jerusalem, an extended account of which Luke provides in Acts, chapter 1, verses 1-11.

John chapter 20, verse 1 speaks of Mary Magdalene going alone to the tomb. Seeing that the stone was removed she ran and reported to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, that His body had been stolen, verse2. Verses 3-10 tell of the two of them running to the tomb; the 'other' disciple got

there first but waited at the tomb's entrance. Peter arrived and went in. The other disciple then went in, saw, and believed. They didn't know then the scriptures concerning His resurrection. They then went home.

Verses 11-18 tell of Mary Magdalene waiting at the tomb, being met by two angels who ask her why she is crying. She replies that it is because her Lord has been taken. She turns around and 'sees' Jesus, not recognising Him. She tells Him that she wants to know to where Jesus' body has been removed. He calls her by name, and she recognises Him. He tells her not to hold Him, but to tell the disciples. Verses 19-23 tell of events that evening. Christ comes to where the disciples are, shows them His hands and side. He commissions them, and they receive from Him the Holy Spirit. Verses 24-25 tell that Thomas was absent. He refuses to believe until he has seen and touched Christ. Verses 26-29 tell of events eight days later. Thomas is present with the disciples. Christ comes and offers him His hands and His side and challenges Thomas to believe. Thomas acknowledges Him. Christ, noting that Thomas had seen and believed, commends those who in future will believe without seeing. Verses 30-31 are an epilogue which explains the purpose for writing the Gospel as a whole, that those who read might believe.[3]

The one common episode is the empty tomb. Matthew, Luke and John speak of appearances of the risen Christ. In every case, He was not able to be recognised until he had either spoken to them or shown His hands and side. Recognition is about seeing and/or hearing, and believing. Once recognised, when with the disciples as a whole Christ commissions them into his service, and promises His continued presence in some form or another.

The Risen Christ is portrayed in terms of the earthly Jesus. This is made clear by the words of the angels/messengers. The empty tomb maybe an actual or a

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[3] There are of course details of resurrrection appearances in I Corinthians 15. Their substance does not affect the conclusions we reach. Indeed Paul's testimony is consistent with our position.

symbolic representation of the truth of what is said. Yet this essential continuity is accompanied by a radical discontinuity. Recognition is no longer merely a matter of seeing and/or hearing, it needs must be accompanied by believing. Christ appears to and is recognised only by those to whom He chooses to show Himself. The period of His appearing is short, yet He anticipates men and women believing in Him long after He is no longer actually to be seen or heard. However, to those who will believe, whether by seeing/hearing, or responding to the proclamation, they will now be able to understand the life of the human Jesus within the context of His death and resurrection. The narratives appear to have been written in order to locate the life of the human Jesus within the wider context of the Risen, ascended Christ.[4]

The texts were produced within the community of believers. Prompted it would seem by the stories told by those who witnessed the events so described, yet shared with those who believed without being witnesses. The essential continuity established between the earthly Jesus and the risen Christ is supplanted by the essential continuity between seeing/believing and believing upon hearing of what others saw. This in turn gives rise to the process of hearing/believing/proclaiming, said to have originated with the risen Christ's commissioning of those who saw and believed.

Our thesis has been predicated upon the argument that the biblical text contains the description of a revelation of God understood in terms of Dialectic presence. – what Dulles described as, "God encounters the human subject when it pleases Him by means of a word in which faith recognises Him to be present...This word simultaneously reveals and conceals the divine presence."[5] The appropriation of this revelation is the work of the Spirit, whose activity is described as being the means according to which the disciples would proclaim that which they had seen

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[4]This in due time will lead to developments concerning the accounts to be given of Jesus' birth – Incarnation, and of his pre-Incarnation status as the pre-existent Son of the Father.

[5]Dulles, Models of Revelation, p28.

and heard. The authority for such an assertion is the faith according to which the authority of the word as God's Word is able to be recognised. There is no extra-revelatory referent. There is no extra-textual referent. Neither the Observation of the empiricist nor the Reasoning of the rationalist can usurp this authority, acknowledgement of which is by faith – a fideistic epistemology. An epistemology without foundations, yet if according to which one believes that the Human Jesus is the Risen Christ in and through whom one has seen revealed the God in whose power Jesus was raised from the dead, then such belief is able to provide a foundation capable of sustaining every aspect of human existence, and explaining any and every aspect of the created order.

We have asserted that the rhetoric of the biblical text is capable of sustaining itself as it is by virtue of the universal appeal yet historical/existential relevance to all who read it.

The accounts of the resurrection speak of God in and through the Risen Christ appearing to those whom He chooses in such a way as to persuade them to see/hear and believe. He upbraids some for their failure to believe, yet affirms those who will come to believe, by being so persuaded. Each is challenged to respond. All without exception respond in acknowledging that as the Risen Christ, Jesus is Lord. The challenge to so believe given down through the ages within the proclamation of the Church, attested to by the witness of the Spirit, contains a self-same challenge, and those who hear are free to make response. However, the structure of the texts serve to prescribe the range of possible responses, because the responses contained within the texts themselves are set within similar constraint. Any reader's response will have to be similarly constrained, just as any hearer of the proclamation is similarly constrained.

Whatever the community of interpreters, the structure of the text prescribes their potential response.[6]

The language of the texts retains their significance because they speak of what is shared by all; revelation, encounter, experience, response. In and through such language, the common currency of human relationships and relatedness God accommodates His revelation of Himself to the world, yet by the work of the Spirit who mediates the revelation, one is able to exchange common currency for a 'pearl of great price' and thereby enter into a relationship which represents God's continuing presence amongst His people as surely as the human Jesus lived amongst his people. At the same time one is aware of the radical discontinuity now required of those who live by faith, as now they realise that they are now brought into a relationship with the Risen Christ, called to live amongst His people as His people. The experience of the transforming power of the accommodation of God to His world in words and the Word.

"These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God and that believing you may have life in His name" John 20, verse 30b..

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[6] Unless of course they do as Cupitt and other proponents of non-realist theology have done, and impose a prior extra-textual constraint – the denial of the knowability of the existence of the supernatural, thereby demanding that anything written of Jesus has to be interpreted/responded to in purely human terms.

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